

# AJANTA



# AJANTA

This is part of the series of guidebooks being published by the Archaeological Survey of India to showcase World Cultural Heritage Sites in India. The book focuses on the Buddhist rock-cut caves of Ajanta located amid the Sahyadri's dense foliage.

The caves are situated at a distance of 6.5 km from the village of Fardapur in Aurangabad district of Maharashtra. Fardapur lies 55 km from Jalgaon, which is also the nearest railhead. The nearest airport is in Aurangabad city, 103 km away.

There are thirty caves at Ajanta, including the unfinished ones, of which five are *chaitya-grīhas* and the rest, *saṅghārāmas* or *vihāras* (monasteries). The earliest excavations at Ajanta date from the second century BC. Excavation was revived on a much more ambitious scale after a quiescence of about four centuries. The most vigorous period of architectural and artistic activity seems to have coincided with the second half of the fifth century AD and the first half of the sixth century AD.

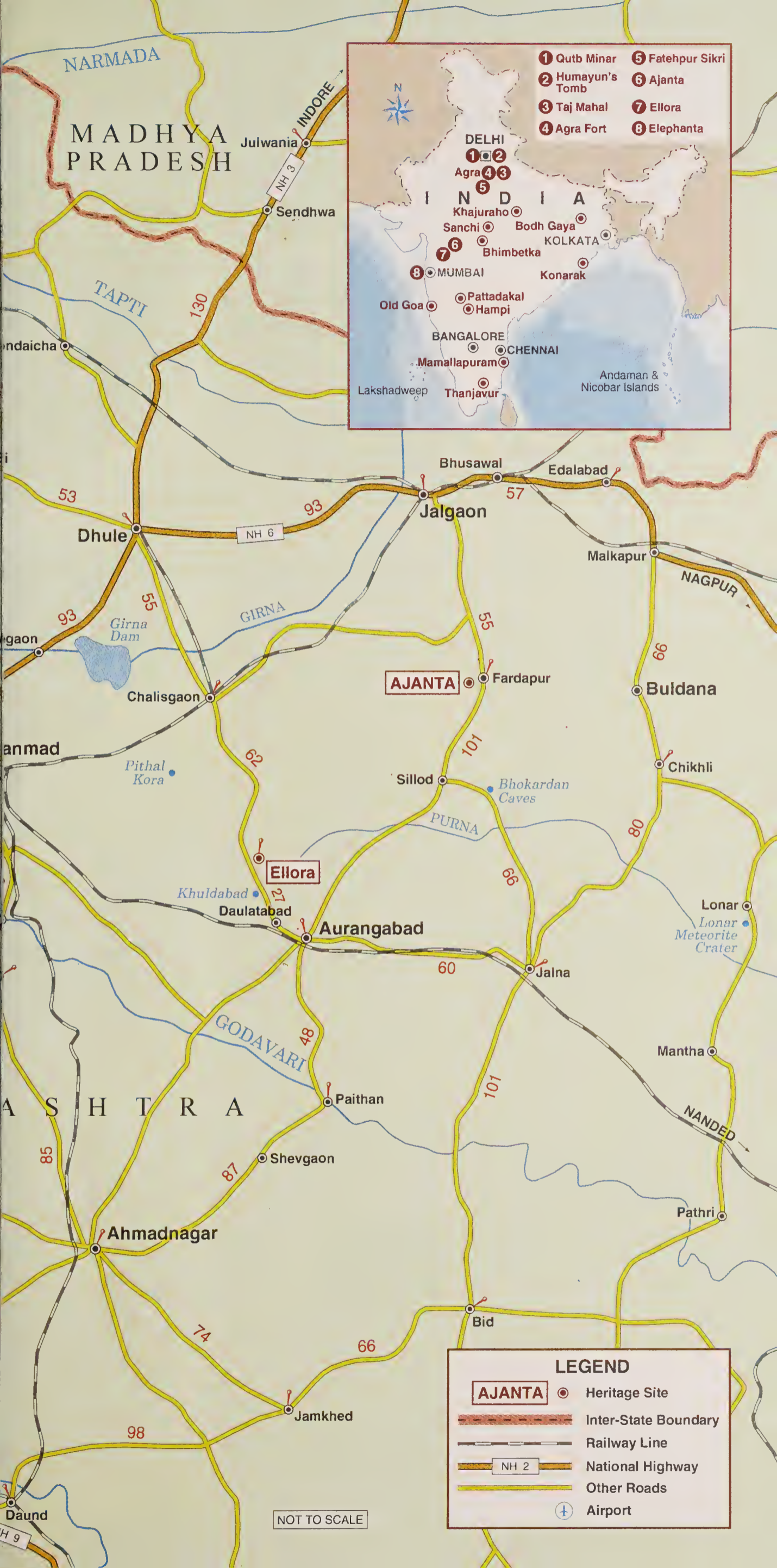
The Ajanta caves are celebrated for their world famous paintings that exhibit the skill and imagination of consummate artists. The sculptures, mostly dating from the fifth and sixth centuries AD, are remarkable for their classic qualities and exude graceful elegance, restraint and serenity.

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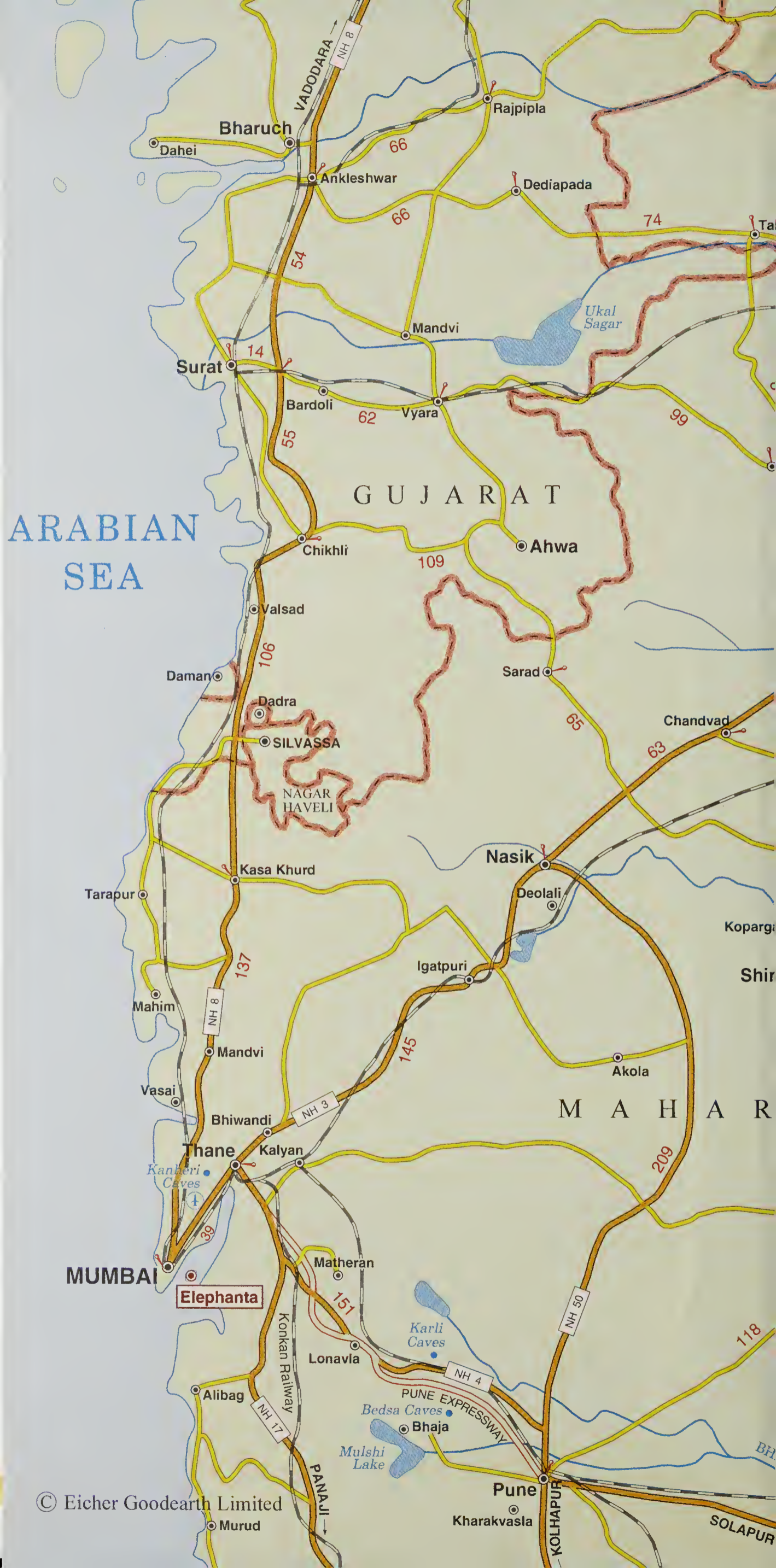
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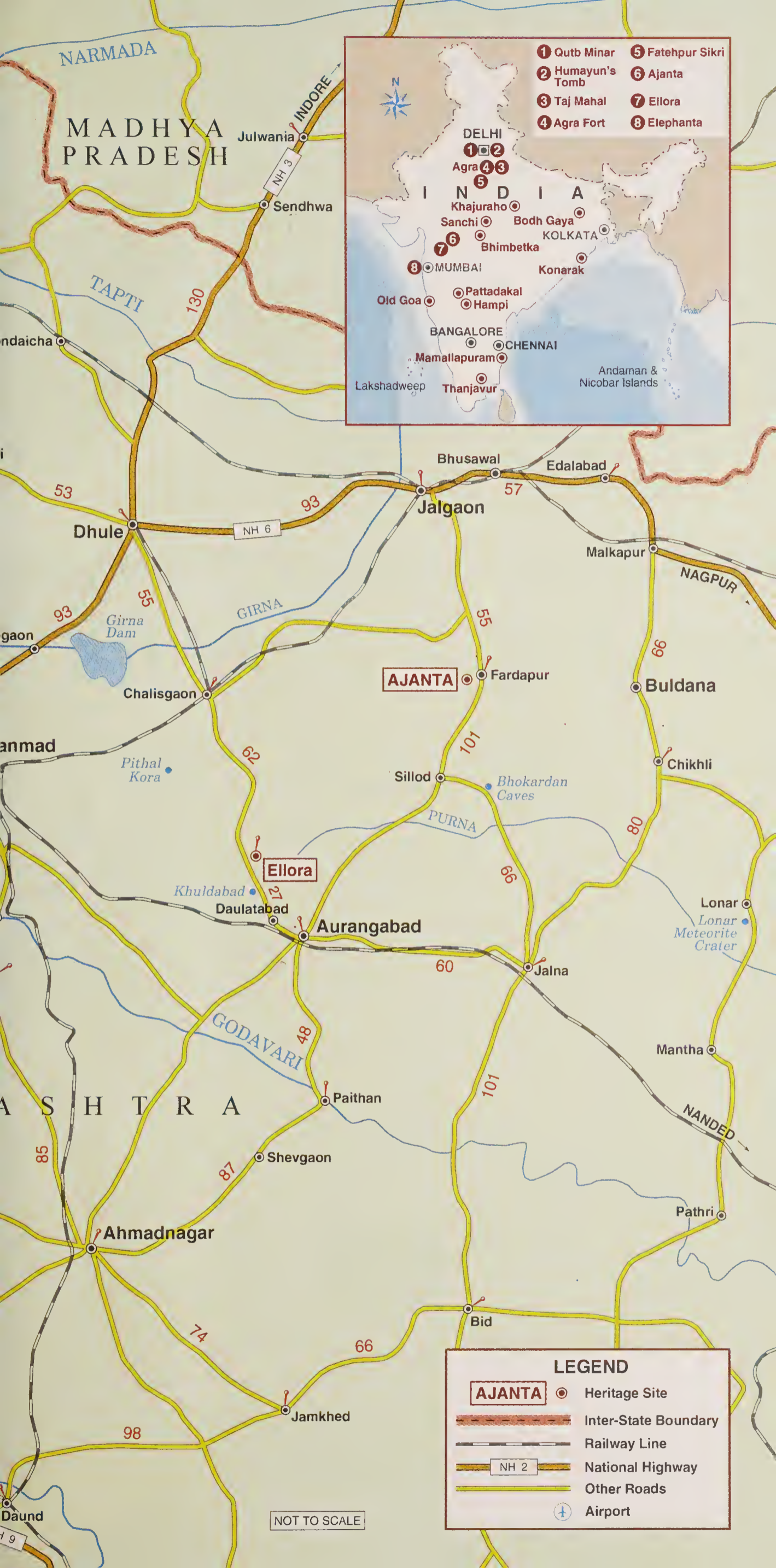
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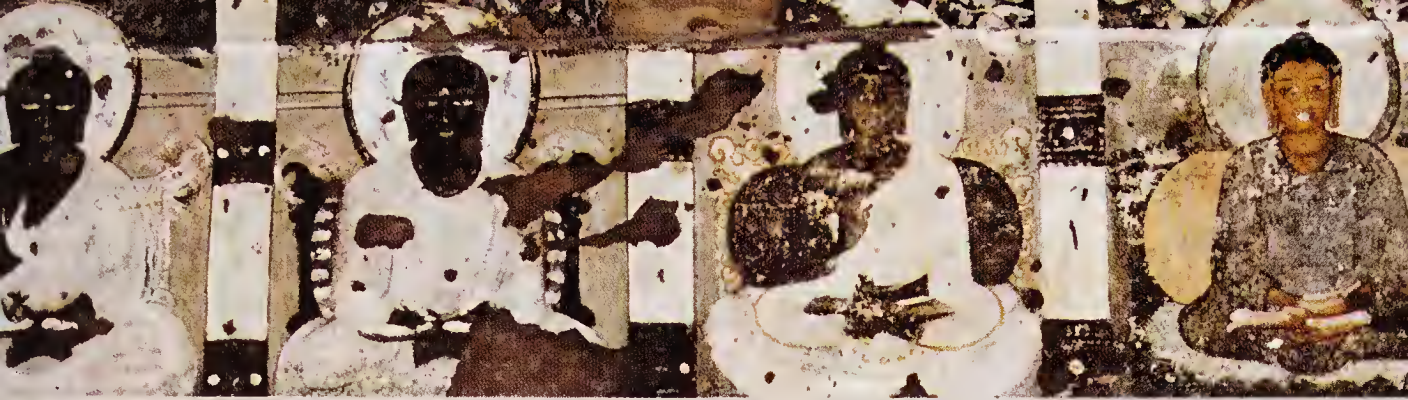
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*World Heritage Series*

# AJANTA

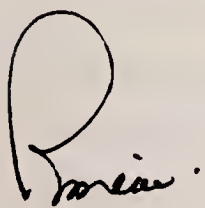
**R**ock-cut caves near Ajanta, possessing perfect specimens of Indian mural paintings were discovered in 1819 by a band of British officers while hunting a tiger.

These caves excavated in a semi-circular scarp overlooking a narrow sinuous gorge, includes five *chaitya-grihas* and some twenty-five *vihāras* or monasteries. They were excavated between the second century BC and seventh century AD and served as sanctuaries for Buddhist monks during the monsoons.

The caves of Ajanta are famous for their architectural qualities, graceful elegance and serenity of sculptures, and above all, the world famous paintings that adorn their interiors.

The paintings are intensely religious in tone and theme and depict the lives and times of Buddha and Bodhisattvas. They also act as a sort of illuminated history of those times – court scenes, street scenes, cameos of domestic life as well as animal and bird sanctuaries. These murals have stood the test of the highest standard of mural paintings.

I am hopeful that readers – both tourists and academicians – would find the new format of the guidebook informative and useful.



R.C. Misra  
Director General (I/C)  
Archaeological Survey of India



Of all the ancient monuments in India, the rock-cut caves near Ajanta (Latitude 20° 32'N and Longitude 75° 45'E) have won a unique place by virtue of their having the most perfect specimens of Indian mural paintings. Their reknown has spread far and wide and is second to none in the country, except probably that of the Taj Mahal. The name, Ajanta casts a spell on the Indian mind and conjures up a vision of artistic excellence attained by the ancient painter's brush.

Ever since the discovery of the caves in the beginning of the nineteenth century their paintings have influenced the artistic pursuits in the country. They provided the greatest inspiration in the art-revival in the first quarter of the twentieth century, as they had influenced many centuries earlier, the art tradition not only of contemporary India but also of Central Asia.

The caves are situated at a distance of 6.5 km from the village of Fardapur in Aurangabad district of Maharashtra, on Maharashtra State Highway No. 8. Fardapur lies 55 km from Jalgaon, which is also the nearest railhead on the Central Railway, 420 and 1120 km from Mumbai and Delhi, respectively. The nearest airport from Fardapur is at Aurangabad, 103 km away.

Fardapur is easily approached by a motorable road from both Aurangabad and Jalgaon. There are regular bus services to the caves up to the T-Junction on the Aurangabad-Jalgaon road. The caves are located at a distance of 4 km from the T-Junction and one has to board special shuttle buses to reach the foothill of the caves. These buses are both air-conditioned and non-air-conditioned and tickets have to be bought for travelling on them.

# General Information

There is no halting place in Ajanta village which is about 5 km (as the crow flies) from the caves. At Fardapur there is a PWD guest-house and an Inspection Bungalow, accommodation for which can be reserved by prior application to the Collector and Executive Engineer, Aurangabad, respectively. Accommodation may also be availed at Holiday Resort at Fardapur run by MTDC (Maharashtra Tourism Development Corporation). Visitors intending to halt near the caves may contact the District Forest Officer, Aurangabad, to reserve accommodation in the Forest Bungalow.

The caves are open on all days (excluding Mondays) from 9 am to 5.30 pm. An entry fee of Rs 10 for Indian citizens and Rs 250 or US \$5 for foreigners is charged. Children below fifteen years of age are admitted

free of charge. Tickets and publications can be purchased at the booking office. For information regarding services of guides, the Superintending Archaeologist, Archaeological Survey of India, Aurangabad Circle, may be contacted. Photographs of the monuments and paintings can be obtained on payment from:

The Director General,  
Archaeological Survey  
of India, Janpath,  
New Delhi-110 011,  
*or*

The Superintending  
Archaeologist,  
Archaeological Survey  
of India,  
Aurangabad Circle,  
Bibi-ka-Maqbara,  
Aurangabad - 431 004.

The visitor with limited time at his disposal should at least visit **Caves 1, 2, 9, 10, 16, 17, 19 and 26.**



The caves at Ajanta are excavated in the semi-circular scarp of a steep rock, about 76 m high, overlooking a narrow sinuous gorge, through which flows the stream Waghora descending at the head of the ravine beyond Cave 28 in a waterfall of seven leaps, known as Sātkuṇḍ. From Cave 16 the visitor can have a convenient view of the waterfall. It is not known under whose initiative and patronage the nucleus of these monastic aeries sprouted, but behind the selection of the spot was

at work an artistic mind, keenly appreciative of the beauties of nature. The caves, excavated for the use of the monks during their retreat in the rainy season (*varshāvāsa*), when the valley was, as it is even now, at its best in verdant beauty, with the stream attaining its utmost breadth and volume, were laid amidst idyllic surroundings, completely shut off from the distractions of the mundane world. This natural beauty, coupled with a perfect seclusion, contributed to the serenity and calm

# Introduction



contemplation of the monks and was not an inconsiderable factor in promoting inspiration in the artist.

The caves are cut out of the amygdaloid trap rock. Extending over 550 m they are aligned in a horseshoe form. Their general arrangement was not pre-planned, as they sprang up sporadically in different periods. Their floor-levels are not uniform, the lowest being Cave 8 and the highest Cave 29. A terraced path of modern construction connects most of the caves, but in ancient

*Above:* Panoramic view of Ajanta caves

.....  
times individual stairways linked the stream with each cave. Most of the stairs have disappeared with the collapse of the front of the caves, only a few, as those of Caves 16 and 17, having partly survived.

The caves, including the unfinished ones, are thirty in number, of which five (9, 10, 19, 26 and 29) are *chaitya-grihas* (sanctuary) and the rest *saṅghārāmas* or *vihāras* (monastery). They resolve themselves into two distinct phases of Buddhist rock-cut



Above: General view of Cave 26 in 1880, after H. Cousens

.....  
 architecture, separated from each other by an interval of about four centuries. The earlier group, comprising six excavations, is an offshoot of the same Buddhist movement, which produced caves at several other places in the Deccan, like Bhaja, Kondane, Pitalkhora, Nasik, etc. Of the six early caves at Ajanta, two, 9 and 10, are *chaitya-grihas* and four, 8, 12, 13 and 15 A, monasteries. The *chaitya-grihas* are characterized

by a vaulted ceiling, the exterior façade being dominated by a huge horseshoe-shaped window, known as *chaitya*-window, over the doorway.

Internally the *chaitya-grihas* are divided by colonnades into a central nave, an apse and side-aisles, the latter continuing behind the apse and, thus, providing for circumambulation. At the centre of the apse stands the object of worship in the form of a *chaitya* or *stūpa*, also hewn out of the live rock; figures of Buddha are absent, as the Buddhists were still labouring under

the convention of not representing the Master in his bodily form.<sup>1</sup> The most striking feature about the *chaitya-grihas* is the servile imitation of wooden construction, including the general contour and essential details.

The rock-cutter went to the extent of using wooden beams and rafters even though they were non-functional. The plan of the monasteries consists of an astylar hall, meant for congregation, with a range of cells on three sides, serving as the dwelling-apartments for monks. All these caves are pre-Christian in date, the earliest to be excavated being Cave 10, dating from the second century BC.

After a quiescence of about four centuries excavation was revived on a much more ambitious scale. The most prolific phase of this movement synchronized with the supremacy of the Vākātakas, contemporaries of the Imperial Guptas of north India, the two families being related by matrimony. Indeed, some of the finest caves, along with the paintings, owe their origin to the munificence of

the officials and feudatories of the Vākātakas of Vatsagulma (modern Basim, District Akola, Maharashtra). Thus, Varāhadeva, the minister of the Vākātika king Harishena (*circa* AD 475-500), dedicated Cave 16 to the Buddhist *sangha*, while Cave 17 was the gift of a prince (who subjugated Aśmaka country), feudatory to the same king.

The most vigorous period of architectural and artistic activity seems to have coincided with the second half of the fifth century AD and the first half of the sixth century AD. There was a considerable decline in the creative impulse from the seventh century, though Hiuen Tsang (Xuznzang), the celebrated Chinese pilgrim, who visited India in the first half of the seventh century AD, has left a graphic description of the flourishing Buddhist establishment here.

'In the east of this country (i.e., Mo-ha-la-ch'a – Mahārāshṭra) was a mountain range, ridges one above another in succession, tiers of peaks and sheer summits. Here was a monastery the base of which was in a dark defile, and its lofty halls and deep chambers were quarried in the cliff and rested on the

<sup>1</sup> The superimposition of the figures of Buddha, seen on the outer sides of Cave 9, is a later execution.

peak, its tiers of halls and storeyed terraces had the cliff on their back and faced the ravine. This monastery had been built by the A-che-lo (Āchāra) of West India.... Within the establishment was a large temple above 100 feet high in which was a stone image of the Buddha above seventy feet high; the image was surmounted by a tier of seven canopies unattached and unsupported, each canopy separated from the one above it by the space of three feet. The walls of this temple had depicted on them the incidents of the Buddha's career as Bodhisattva, including the circumstances of his attaining *Bodhi* and the omens attending his final passing away, all great and small were here delineated. Outside the gate of the monastery, on either side north and south, was a stone elephant.... The P'usa Ch'en-na or Dinnāga stayed much in this monastery.<sup>1</sup>

It is interesting to note that an inscription in Cave 26, assigned to a period between AD 450 and 525 on palaeographical grounds, refers to the building of a 'rocky house' (*śaila-griha*) for the Teacher (Buddha) by Sthavira Achala.

*Right: Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, Cave 1*

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Among the monasteries of Ajanta, Cave 16 alone preserves two stone elephants guarding the base of its stairway. A fragmentary Rāshtrakūṭa record of uncertain purpose, inscribed on the right wall of the landing to the left of the court of Cave 26, proves the use of the caves even during the eighth-ninth centuries AD.

During the second phase of excavation, after the initial stage of experiment in Cave 11, the general layout of the monasteries was standardized, though each one of them presents some interesting and individual features. Of the three *chaitya-grihas* of this period, Cave 29 is unfinished. The other two, Caves 19 and 26, are designed on the plan of the earlier *chaitya-grihas* with the significant difference that the interior is treated with luxuriant carvings and the figure of Buddha appears on the central *stūpa* – aniconism having by now given way to iconism.

A profusion of the figures of Buddha can be seen both on the façade and in the interior.

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Watters, *On Yuan Chwang's Travels in India, II* (London, 1905), pp. 239 and 140.





The plan of the monasteries, however, shows greater innovation, the most important of which is the introduction of a shrine-chamber, containing a colossal image of Buddha in the back wall opposite the doorway – the monasteries, thus, serving the dual purpose of monastic dwelling and sanctuary. Sometimes subsidiary shrines are scooped out not only on the back-side of the hall but also on other sides.

The unfinished caves furnish a very good idea of the method of excavation. After the outline had been marked, excavation started from the ceiling, which was finished first. The work then continued downwards by the cutting of deep alleys with sharp and heavy instruments like the pickaxe, followed by the breaking of the intervening ridges, leaving solid blocks, for pillars where necessary, till the floor was reached which was the last to receive attention. The preliminary work of excavation was done by pickaxe and the finishing and carving was entirely executed by hammer and chisel. The work of quarrying, dressing and

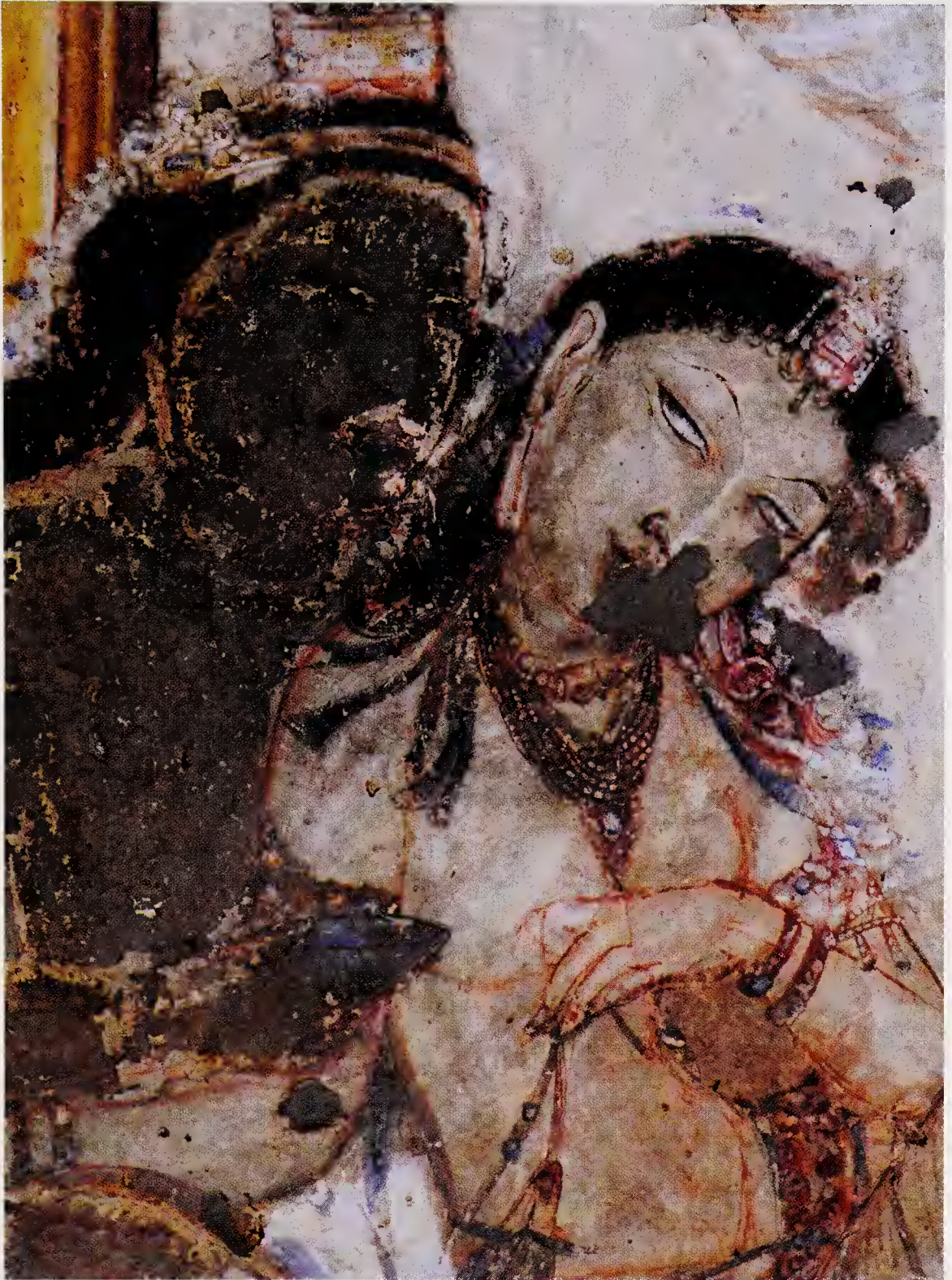
finishing presumably went hand in hand.<sup>1</sup>

After finishing the façade and the verandah the excavator went deep into the interior, attending first to the hall and next the antechamber, shrine or cells as the case might be, the procedure of the excavation being the same. The entire operation bespeaks great delicacy, precision and carefulness on the part of the rock-cutter.

The caves at Ajanta offer an instructive field for the study of the evolution of rock-cut architecture. Their architectural qualities, like their sculpture, seldom receive due attention, which is focussed on the world-famous paintings that they bear. Sculpture, mostly dating from the fifth and sixth centuries AD, is remarkable for its classic qualities and exhales an aroma of graceful elegance, restraint and serenity. The spiritual luminosity of the contemporary images of Buddha from Sarnath is, however, wanting in most of the figures of Buddha here.

The paintings fall into two distinct periods separated from each other by a fairly long interval. The earlier paintings,

<sup>1</sup> From the fact that even unfinished caves bear traces of paintings it may be presumed that the chisel-work and brush-work proceeded simultaneously.



*Above: Scene from Vessantara  
Jātaka, Cave 17*

scanty specimens of which have survived on the walls of Caves 9 and 10, go back to the second-first centuries BC.

The costumes of the figures, specially the head-gear and ornaments, resemble those in the bas-reliefs at Sanchi and Bharhut. Even these paintings demonstrate an appreciable maturity,

indicating considerable practice behind them, and surpass in excellence the contemporary plastic art. Their importance is further enhanced by the fact that very little of Indian painting of this type and of this period has survived.

The second period of the paintings started in about the fourth-fifth century and continued for the next two centuries. The earlier phase of this period synchronized with the rule



of the Vākātakas, when the high watermark of the painter's brush-work was reached.

Substantial remains of this phase have survived in Caves 1, 2, 16 and 17, though originally all the finished caves, and even most of the unfinished ones, were painted all over. In spite of the inequality in the standards of workmanship due to varied authorship, the paintings of this period throughout maintain an exalted height and enthral the spectator by their rich beauty, superb expressiveness, colour-scheme, balanced and effective composition, fine shading and highlight bringing into relief a plasticity, suppleness and sensitive modelling of the figures, bold but faultless outline, delicate, artistic and idealized, but never unnatural, bodily features and women ever beautiful in all conceivable poses and moods. In fact, the paintings have stood the test of the highest art-standard of mural paintings.

A steady decline in the painter's art is evidenced in later additions or

.....  
*Left:* Part of the panel of Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, Cave 1

palimpsests, till it became effete without any pretension to artistic excellence as seen in the rigid, mechanical and lifeless figures of Buddha in later paintings.

The theme of the paintings on the walls is intensely religious in tone and mostly centres round Buddha, Bodhisattvas, incidents from the life of Buddha and the *Jātakas* presenting tales of the previous births of Gautama Buddha. These topics, specially the last two, besides offering visual representations of didactic themes to supplement the teachings of the elder monks to their pupils, also afforded the painter an unlimited scope for depicting the whole gamut of human life from birth to death – men, women and children of all stations of life, from the king to the slave, from the rich to the beggar, from the saint to the sinner – in the crowded drama of sublimity and coarseness, love and hatred, joy and sorrow, triumph and tribulation, compassion and ingratitude, pageantry and poverty, longing and death – all pervaded by an intense religiosity.

The paintings are the mirrors of contemporary life in palace, court, town,

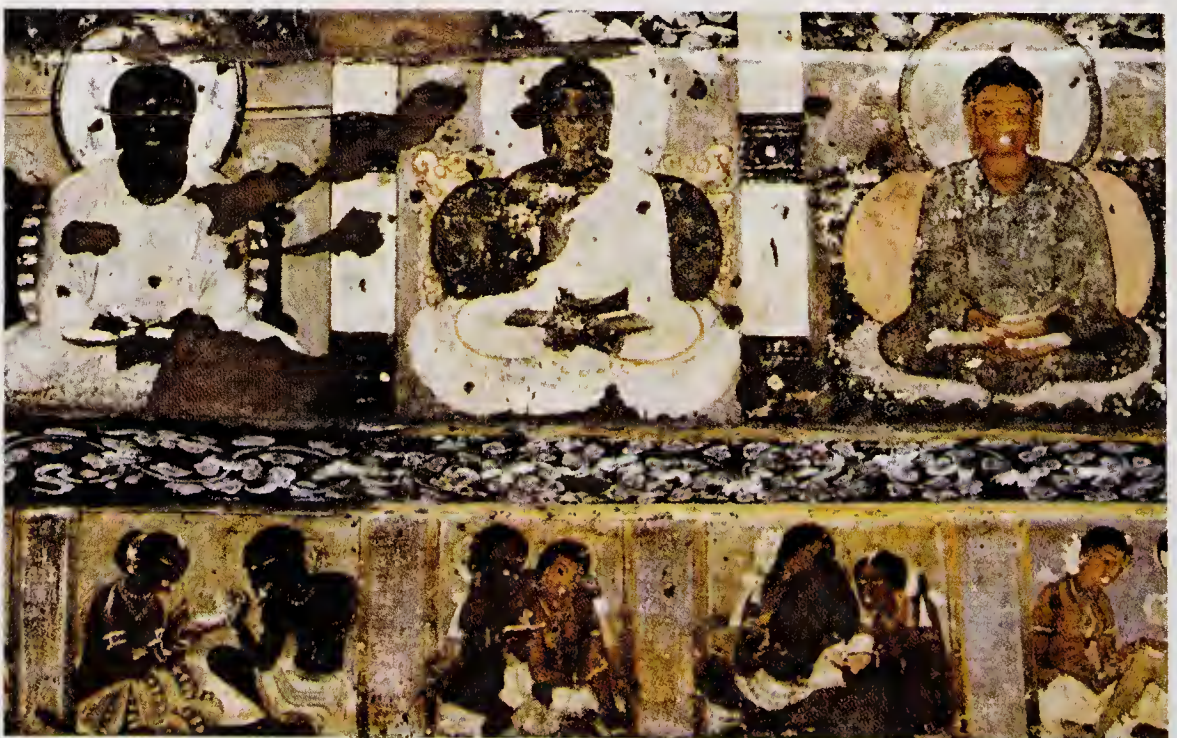
village, hamlet and hermitage. They are the illuminative documentary on the beliefs and usages, dress, ornaments, musical instruments, utensils and weapons including modes of warfare. They present before the ethnologist a vivid picture of the people of different nationalities and races. They are the windows through which one can have a glimpse of the heavenly world – peopled by gods, and semi-divine beings like *yakshas*, *kinnaras* (half human and half bird), *gandharvas* (divine musicians), and *apsarases* (heavenly dancers) – as conceived by the people of the time. The remarkable array of the varieties of temples,

.....  
*Below.* Entrance to the monastery showing past Buddhas and Maitreya, the future Buddha, above and *yaksha*-couple, below, Cave 17

palaces, pavilions, city-gates, ramparts, huts, *stūpas* and monasteries forms a precious mine of information for the student of architecture.

The paintings on the ceiling, on the other hand, are essentially decorative in character and open up a panorama of endless patterns, woven with flowers, plants, fruits, birds, beasts and human and semi-divine beings, all permeated with naturalness, freshness and grace and bearing the stamp of an unerring command over form.

For the execution of the paintings, the ground was first prepared by laying a rough layer of ferruginous earth, mixed with rock-grit or sand, vegetable-fibres, paddy-husk, grass and other fibrous material of organic origin, on the surfaces of the walls and ceilings, which





were left rough so that they might act as 'tooth' for the rough plaster to set firmly upon them.

Next, a second coat of mud and ferruginous earth, mixed with fine rock-powder or sand and fine fibrous vegetable-material, was applied to it. The surface was finally finished with a thin coat of limewash.

On this surface the outlines were first drawn boldly; the spaces were then filled in with requisite colours in different shades and tones to achieve the effect of rounded and plastic volumes.

The colour-scale is extremely simple and limited, there being only red and yellow ochre, *tetta verte*,

*Above: Painted ceiling showing elephant, Cave 1*

lime, kaolin, gypsum, lamp-black and lapis lazuli. Except the last, which is still exceptionally fresh and bright and which is absent in the earlier paintings, all the basic colours are locally available.

The binding medium has generally been identified as glue. Thus, in the absence of the genuine fresco-technique (*fresco buono*), in which pigments are mixed with water without any binding medium and applied on a fresh wet lime-plaster, it is a misnomer to call the mural paintings of Ajanta 'frescoes'.





# Description of Caves

The caves are numbered not chronologically but as a matter of convenience, starting with the one at the outermost extremity.

## Cave 1

Consisting of a verandah, a hall, groups of cells and a sanctuary, it is one of the finest monasteries at Ajanta, distinguished from the others by its decorated façade, the beauty of which, though somewhat marred by the collapse of the small portico originally supported on two pillars in front, lies in its richly-carved pillars and entablature.

.....  
Left: Consort of Bodhisattva,  
Cave 1

Below: General view of Cave 1

The columns, six in number, have square bases with figures of small dwarfs at the four corners and elaborately-decorated bracket-capitals. The shafts, however, vary in shape and design. The two central ones are first octagonal, then sixteen-sided and next fluted, with bands of fine tracery of singular beauty. The central compartment of their capitals is adorned with a squat dwarf, and the projecting ends have the figures of flying couples with garlands and flowers in their hands.

Underlying the capital is a square abacus, delicately carved with *makara*-motifs and supported by dwarfs, below which is an *āmalaka*-like member between two fillets. The next two pillars



have above the octagon spiral flutings with belts of tracery. Their crowning members are similar to those of the central pillars, except that the central panels contain figures of Buddha in preaching attitude.

The shafts of the outermost pillars are octagonal all through, relieved at places by bands of ornamental designs. Their capitals rest on a heavy square abacus carved with *kīrti-mukha* sprouting forth pearl-strings, the ends of which are held by two flying figures. On the central panel of the right pillar is depicted the Assault and Temptation of Māra (*see* p. 26).

Besides the pillars, the verandah has two pilasters carved with a half and a full lotus-medallions of a most ornate pattern. The lowest frieze of the architrave is decorated with varied motifs taken from human and animal worlds, of which elephants and buffalo-fights are rendered with consummate skill. Particularly interesting is the return of this frieze on the left side-chapel, on which are represented three out of the four Ominous Sights, *viz.*, a sick man, an old man and a corpse, which Gautama



encountered in the course of his drives through the pleasure-gardens and which were ultimately responsible for his decision of renunciation.

The verandah has a cell at either end. Outside the verandah is a raised pillared porch at either extremity. The one on the right leads to a cell, while that on the left used to lead to two cells, one of which has perished. There was a second cell adjoining the porch on the right side. Very little of this cell, which now guards the entrance of the visitor to the caves, remains.

Access to the hall is provided by three doors,



the central one, flanked by a window on either side, being richly carved with bands of human and floral motifs. Next to the innermost band of floral patterns is a projecting member carved with figures in compartments, the lowest of which contains a *nāga*-figure and the others have standing couples in different attitudes, while on the lintel are five seated pairs, some of them playing on musical instruments.

The outermost band takes the shape of a pilaster crowned by a female figure standing gracefully on a *makara* under a tree.

*Above:* Quadripartite deer, Cave 1

.....

Around the hall, the ceiling of which is supported on twenty pillars, arranged in a square, and four pilasters, are hewn out fourteen cells, each with a narrow door and a niche on the back wall.

The pillars of the hall are exquisitely decorated in the style of the verandah-pillars, the greatest ornamentation, however, being lavished on the two middle columns in the back row. The central panels of the bracket-capitals contain various motifs, including scenes from the life of Buddha, worship of the



Above: Buddha, Cave 1

.....  
*stūpa*, god of wealth and groups of figures including animals. Of the last, those on the two central columns of the right row are interesting: here four deer are provided with one head, but the rendering is so cleverly done that it looks consistent and realistic.

A small pillared antechamber, opposite the entrance-door, leads into the sanctum, in which a

colossal image<sup>1</sup> of Buddha seated in the *vajraparyāṅkāśana* posture in preaching attitude (*dharmacakra-pravartana-mudrā*) is scooped out in alto-relievo. On either side is a standing *chāmara* (fly-whisk)-bearer; the one on the right is Vajrapāṇi, as the three-pronged *vajra* (thunderbolt) in his left hand shows.

Both the figures are profusely ornamented while their luxuriantly-coiled tresses fall gracefully on one side. At the top

<sup>1</sup> The figure is rather heavy and lacks the attenuated and delicate modelling that relieves the heaviness and accelerates the spiritual dignity of the contemporary images of Buddha from Sarnath.

corners of the halo hover two flying figures holding garlands. The pedestal is relieved with a wheel in profile between two deer – an indubitable reference to Mr̥igadāva (Sarnath near Varanasi), the venue of the First Sermon.<sup>1</sup> In the figures of the five monks flanking the left deer can be recognized the first five disciples (*pāñcha-vargīya-bhikshus*). The halo and *chhatra* (umbrella) over the head are painted. The door-jambs of the shrine are elaborately, carved with scroll-work, floral motifs, *nāgas*, couples, female figures standing on *makaras*, etc. The pillars of the antechamber have beautiful bracket-figures of *nāyikās* with attendants.

Though there is no inscription to give an absolute date to the cave, it cannot be far removed in date from the Ghaṭotkacha cave at Gulwada (18 km west of Ajanta), which contains an inscription of Varāhadeva, minister of Harisheṇa (*circa* AD 475-500), as they closely resemble each other in general plan and decorative details. On stylistic grounds

it seems to be a little earlier than Cave 2, which have painted inscriptions dating from the first half of the sixth century.

Every inch of this cave was originally painted, the pillars and the sculptures being no exception.

Unfortunately, much of the paintings have peeled off, but from the surviving patches one can easily imagine its pristine grandeur. The cave contains some of the masterpieces of paintings in the world. The figures of large-sized Bodhisattvas are the *chef-d'oeuvre* of the artists here. 'Of large dimensions they are yet weightless; fully bodied forth in solid rounded plasticity, they are yet melting in *Karuṇā*, and seemingly in motion in the midst of a radiantly moving and rejoicing world, they seem to have become stilled into silence before a great realisation. With eyelids lowered they withdraw themselves into their own depths.'<sup>2</sup>

The panels on the back wall of the inner aisle, immediately to the left and right of the antechamber, are dominated by the

<sup>1</sup> After his Enlightenment Buddha went to the Deer-Park at R̥shipatana (present Sarnath) where he preached his First Sermon to five ascetics of his previous acquaintance. This is known as *dharma-chakra-pravartana* (setting the Wheel of Law in motion), which is symbolically represented by a wheel flanked by two deer.

<sup>2</sup> *The Classical Age*, edited by R.C.Majumdar and A.D.Pusalker (Bombay, 1954), p.544.

towering figures of two Bodhisattvas. The one on the left holds a lily; to his left is probably his consort, also holding a lily – a dark beauty brightened by the highlight on the nose and the lips. Between them is a *chāmara*-bearer wearing a blue long coat, while to the left of the Bodhisattva is a dark mace-bearer wearing a white long coat.

In the left corner are divine musicians and flying figures, below whom is a couple seated in a hilly retreat. In the right corner blissful joy is indicated by frolicking monkeys, peacocks and a happy couple.

On the right can be seen another Bodhisattva leaning in a graceful pose against a personage wearing a long coat. The elaborate ornamentation of his diadem is captivating. To his right is a king offering him lilies on a tray.

Of the two dark ladies near the bottom, of whom only the busts have survived, one is offering lilies to the other (commonly labelled as Dark Princess), the latter's features are extremely delicate and refined. On the top left near a gate is a standing couple absorbed in religious conversation, as is apparent from the *mudrā*,

(hand-pose) of the right hand of the male figure.

Outside, flanking the doorway of the shrine are two more Bodhisattvas, the one on the right being Vajrapāṇi. Much of these figures is now damaged, but enough remains to give an idea of the elegance and delicacy of feeling of the master-hand.

The two side-walls of the antechamber depict two important incidents from the Master's life. The one on the left represents the Assault and Temptation of Māra on the eve of Enlightenment. When Gautama took his seat on the *vajrāsana* (adamantine seat), determined not to leave it till he was perfectly enlightened, Māra, the Evil One, tried his best to thwart his purpose and attacked him with a mighty army. But Gautama remained unmoved on his seat and invoked the earth to bear witness to his right to the *vajrāsana*. The latter's reply silenced Māra who fled away discomfited. Gautama is seen here touching the Earth (*bhūmisparśa-mudrā*), while on either side is the hideous retinue of Māra threatening him in every

.....  
*Right: Bodhisattva Padmapāṇi, Cave 1*



possible manner. In the two female figures by the side of Gautama as well as the group in front can be recognized the beautiful daughters of Māra who attempted in vain to seduce him.

The right wall of the antechamber is painted with the Miracle of Śrāvastī. In order to confound the six heretical teachers, Buddha performed a few miracles in the presence of a group of spectators headed by king Prasenjit of Śrāvastī. One of the miracles was his multiplying himself into innumerable Buddhas in different *mudrās*, poised on lotuses.

The walls of the hall contain representations of a large number of the *Jātakas*.<sup>1</sup> Starting from the front wall to the left of the main doorway, the visitor will first encounter a version of the *Sibi Jātaka*<sup>2</sup>, where Bodhisattva was born as prince Sibi and, in order to redeem a pigeon from a hawk, went to the extent of giving an equal weight of his own flesh to the hawk.

On the extreme left the pigeon can be seen nestling in the lap of the king, while on the right, beyond a pavilion, the king is standing by a pair of scales.

The identification of the next scene, which is much damaged, is not certain. In the central panel we find a sad princess engaged in conversation with a maid-of-honour within a pavilion. A female attendant holds a toilet-tray in her hands. A servant, to judge from his demeanour, is delivering some unpleasant message, which he had received from the figure (*kañchukin?*), standing, with a pensive and sorrowful facial expression, at the gate of the women's apartments.

The latter is sparsely ornamented and wears a uniform-like white long coat and holds a staff and as such cannot be identified with either a *bhikshu* or Buddha, as has been proposed by some. The scene possibly represents the pathetic conversion of Nanda, the half-brother of Buddha. The story goes

<sup>1</sup> The *Jātakas* are stories of the previous births of Gautama Buddha, who is believed, as Bodhisattva (a being who is in the process of obtaining Buddhahood), to have passed innumerable existences, both human and animal, persistently qualifying himself for Buddhahood by the greatest acquisition (*pāramitā*) of all kinds of virtues.

<sup>2</sup> The story as represented here follows the version of the *Mahābhārata* and *Sūtrālaṅkāra*, and not the Pali *Jātakas* which do not mention the pigeon-episode.



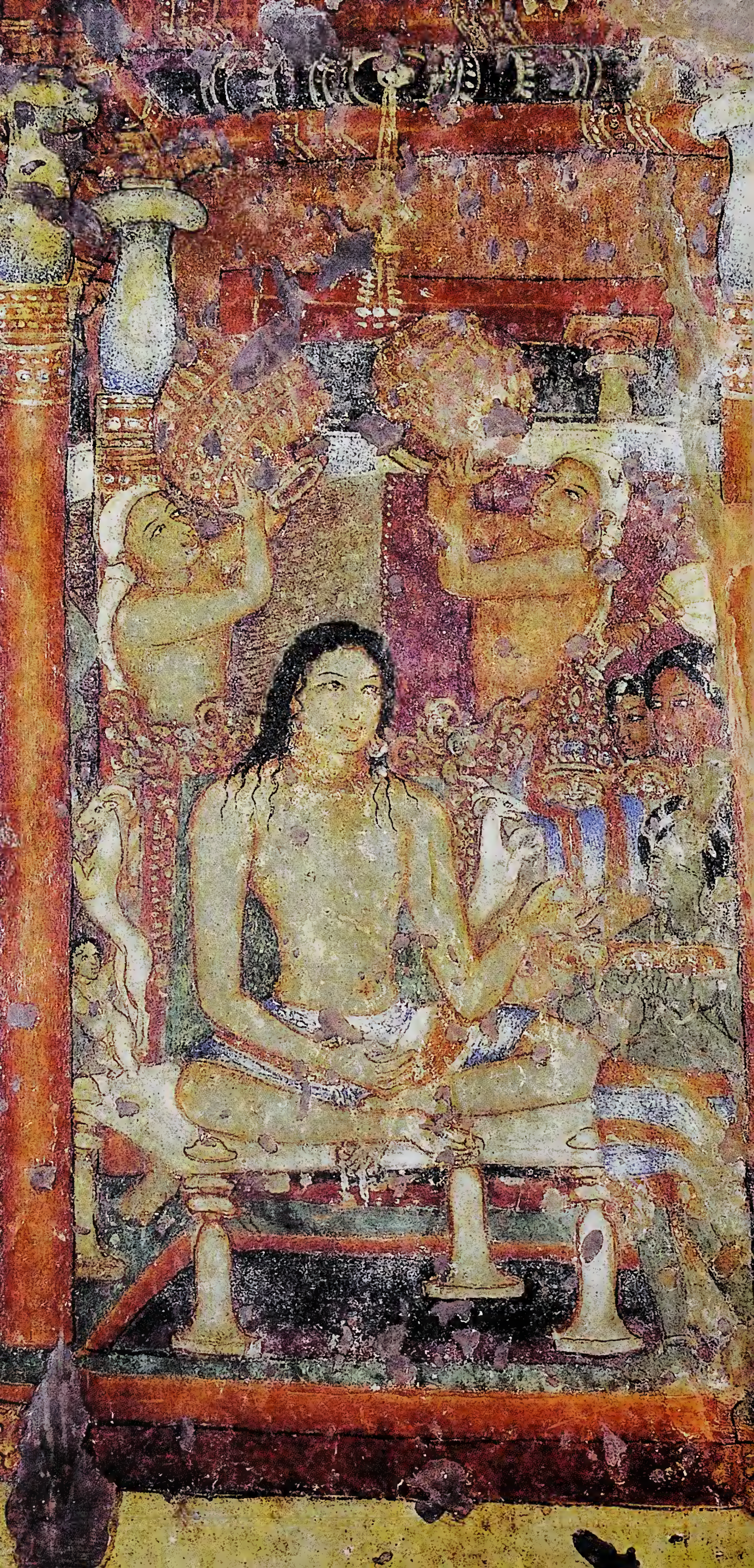
that Buddha converted Nanda, who was extremely unwilling to take to the new monastic life imposed upon him, as he was enamoured of his wife Sundarī.

The proposed identification gains strength from the panel immediately to the left, where a broken-hearted lady is lying on a couch and attendants are

trying to revive and console her. She reminds one of Sundarī, who fainted on hearing from a servant the news of her husband's conversion. Though the details of Nanda's forced ordination, which are clearly depicted in Cave 16 (see p. 60) are missing here,

.....  
*Below:* Scene from conversion of Nanda, Cave 1





it is not unlikely that they existed in the lower portion of the panel which has entirely disappeared now. The next panel, the greater part of which has peeled off, seems to have formed part of the same theme.

The palace-scene of a *nāga* king, which forms the theme of the extreme left panel of the left wall, seems to be a continuation of the *Samkhapāla Jātaka* (Cowell's no. 524), which is painted next beyond the pilaster. The story of Samkhapāla runs thus: Bodhisattva, born as the prince of Magadha, desired to be born in the *nāga* world at the sight of the splendour of the *nāga* king Samkhapāla, who used to visit his ascetic father in the hermitage. Born in his next birth as the *nāga* king Samkhapāla, he soon grew sick of his state of glory and, by way of atonement for his former desire, lay on an ant-hill offering his body to anybody who might want it. One day a party of sixteen men wounded him and dragged him along by means of a rope running through his nostrils, but Samkhapāla offered no resistance. Aḷāra, a kind-hearted householder, who

was passing that way with five hundred wagons, took pity upon the serpent and delivered him from persecution by paying coins and oxen to the maltreaters.

Samkhapāla took his benefactor to his aquatic palace and entertained him with great pleasures for a year, after which Aḷāra became an ascetic. On the top left of the painting we find the king of serpents listening to the sermon of the ascetic, formerly a king of Magadha. Much of this portion has peeled off. The figure of the seated lady listening in rapt attention with her back turned shows a masterly drawing. To the right, Samkhapāla is being dragged by the hunters, below which is the figure of Aḷāra ready for the ransom with his oxen. In the bottom left Samkhapāla, now assuming human form, leads his rescuer to the lotus-lake, his abode.

The panels on the left wall beyond the *Samkhapāla Jātaka* have not been satisfactorily identified. Formerly, all of them were taken to depict the *Mahājanaka Jātaka* (no. 539). The story of this *Jātaka* is as follows. The king of Mithilā was killed by his brother in a battle. His queen, who was with child, fled to

.....  
Left: Scene from *Mahājanaka Jātaka*, Cave 1



*Above: Scene from Mahājanaka Jātaka, Cave 1*

Champā, where she secretly brought up her son.

When the boy, named Mahājanaka, grew up, he sailed for Suvarṇabhūmi with his merchandise but was shipwrecked and carried by a goddess to Mithilā, where he married Sīvalī, the daughter of the usurper who had recently died. In the course of time, he renounced the world. Sīvalī tried to dissuade him from his purpose but all her efforts failed.

The panel on the extreme left is taken to depict Sīvalī's endeavour to captivate Mahājanaka with worldly pleasures. In the pavilion the queen is seated leaning against him, her feet being pressed by a maid. On the right, dance accompanied by music is in full swing. The figure of the dancer is extremely graceful and pleasing. Below the pavilion is seen a lady pounding ointment within a hut. From the expression of the king it is clear that he is not taking delight in all this mirth. Next, the king



is seen coming out of the city-gate on an elephant in order to listen to the religious discourse of an ascetic in a rocky shelter, depicted above, where the king is shown again with folded hands amidst an assemblage.

The next panel and also the voyage and shipwreck scenes along with fragments of paintings near it have been identified by Dieter Schlingloff<sup>1</sup> with Kalyāṇakārin's adventures. The story of Kalyāṇakārin

runs thus. The generous prince Kalyāṇakārin along with his wicked younger brother set out on a voyage to obtain treasures. On their return journey the ship sank, but Kalyāṇakārin succeeded in saving himself and his brother. In order to get possession of the jewels, the wicked brother blinded Kalyāṇakārin while he was asleep and returned home with his loot. In the course of his wanderings Kalyāṇakārin reached the capital of a king. The king's daughter chose him as her husband. After regaining his eyesight by means of a *satyakriyā* (solemn profession of truth), the prince returned along with his wife to his father's kingdom and ruled there after the death of his father. A clue to the identification is provided by the figure with a bandage over the eyes below the shipwreck scene.

The upper panel on the back wall, to the left of the Bodhisattva holding a lily, has a lustration-scene within a pavilion, with four supplicants standing outside in expectation of gifts. The pavilion left to this contains a youngish person donned in the robe of a monk and having a bowl in hand, with four ladies paying homage to

<sup>1</sup> *Artibus Asiae*, vol. xxxviii, 1, pp.5 ff.

him. To the left of this is a king seated on a throne. Below the lustration-scene is a much obliterated panel, in which some have found a reference to the *Mahā-ummagga Jātaka* (no. 546), where Amarā, wife of the sagacious Mahosadha, outwitted four wicked men pretending to be wise.

The *Champeyya Jātaka* (no. 506) is delineated on the back wall to the right of the richly-bejewelled Bodhisattva. In fulfilment

.....  
*Below: Scene from Mahājanaka Jātaka, Cave 1*

of his desire Bodhisattva was reborn as the *nāga* king Champeyya. Feeling, disgusted, however, with his reptile existence, he went to the world of men to observe penance and stationed himself on an ant-hill. He allowed himself to be caught by a snake-charmer who made him dance. One day, when he was dancing in the presence of the king of Varanasi, the latter set him free at the request of the *nāgī* Sumanā, Champeyya's wife. Out of gratitude Champeyya conducted the





*Above: Scene from Champeyya Jātaka, Cave 1*

king to the abode of the serpents and lavishly entertained him for seven days; then he sent him back loaded with treasures. On the top left is the dejected figure of Champeyya in his palace, while on the right is the court-scene of the king of Varanasi. The king along with his courtiers is listening to the appeal of

Sumanā for the release of her husband at least for the sake of her child whom she has put forward. To the right of the king is the figure of the snake-charmer who is making the snake dance. In the bottom panel, on the extreme left, are the damaged figures of Champeyya and the king of Varanasi who have just alighted from an elephant near a gateway, apparently of Champeyya's palace. To

the right of this, both the kings are seen seated surrounded by ladies and attendants. The hand-pose (*mudrā*) of the serpent-king suggests that he is delivering some religious discourse to the king of Varanasi.

The court-scene on the front wall to the right of the

.....  
*Below: A moustached celestial musician (kinnara), Cave 1*

main doorway has been a subject of controversy. At the centre is seen a royal personage seated at ease on a high backed throne and surrounded by his courtiers and attendants. To the right are several foreigners some outside the gate of the hall, some entering it and the rest within it. They wear peaked caps and some of them have beards. The three nearer the throne are





respectfully approaching the king with rich presents; the one leading the party offers a pearl necklace, the second most probably holds a purse and the third carries a tray of jewellery.

The scene has often been interpreted as the Chālukya king Pulakeśin II (AD 610-42) receiving an embassy from the Sassanian king Khusrau II (AD 596-628) of Persia. As there is

no record of the Persian king having sent any embassy to the court of Pulakeśin, the identification of the royal portrait with the latter is ruled out. In view of the fact that all the wall-paintings of Ajanta are for the edification of the Buddhists, it is but natural to seek in these paintings, too, the representation of some subject connected with Buddhism.<sup>1</sup>

As already noted, the paintings of the ceiling are decorative in character. Innumerable small panels form a rich treasure-house of floral, vegetal and animal motifs, relieved here and there by comic figures and drinking scenes. In three of the latter scenes, where a group of foreigners is seen indulging in drinks, some have again tried to find Khusrau II of Persia and his beautiful wife Shīrīn, but Bacchanalian scenes are not so uncommon a motif in Indian art to require explanation by personal references.

The depiction of a bull-fight, superbly realistic, on the central compartment of the bracket-capital of a pillar on the left row displays the consummate skill of the unknown artist.

<sup>1</sup> The panel is faintly reminiscent of the celebrated Buddhist emperor Asoka's reception of foreign embassies.





## Cave 2

This monastery, though smaller in dimensions, is somewhat similar to Cave 1. At either end of the verandah is a small cell with a pillared porch in front, the architrave above the pillars being divided into three panels. The central compartment on the right porch is carved with a seated *nāga* king and his attendants, while the side-ones are relieved with pot-bellied *yakshas*, the right one being the Buddhist counterpart of Kubera. The central figure on the façade of the left porch is probably

*Above: Hārītī and her consort, Cave 2*

Hārītī,<sup>1</sup> as she has got a child on her lap.

The pillars of the verandah differ from those of Cave 1. They have moulded bases, the tapering shafts changing from sixteen sides to thirty-two flutes, relieved by belts of tracery and surmounted by a capital having two lotuses with an *āmalaka*-like object in between.

A richly-carved doorway, flanked by a decorated window on either side, gives access to the pillared hall.

<sup>1</sup> Hārītī was an ogress who used to devour the children of Rājagṛiha. Buddha, intending to teach her a lesson, one day concealed her favourite child. The infuriated mother attacked Buddha but was converted by him. On her request for the subsistence of her family, Buddha is said to have assured her of food in every monastery. The custom of the installation of an image of Hārītī either in the porch or in the dining-room of Indian monasteries was noticed by the Chinese pilgrim I-tsing, who also recorded the relevant tradition.

The pillars, twelve in number, are decorated in the manner of those of the hall of Cave 1, the central pillars of the front and back rows having the minutest carvings to the point of over-ornamentation. There are ten cells on two of its sides.

The back wall of the shrine is carved with the figure of Buddha in teaching attitude flanked by *chāmara*-bearers, the left one being Padmapāṇi. The door of the shrine and the pillars and pilasters of the antechamber are profusely ornamented. Projecting from the base of the capitals of the central pillars of the antechamber and

supporting the architrave are bracket-figures of *nāyikās* with attendants.

On each side of the antechamber is a subsidiary pillared chapel, of which the right one contains seated figures of Hāritī and her consort. Between them is a woman with a bird perched on her left hand and a flower in her right hand, and on each side is a female *chāmara*-bearer. In the two scenes at the top corners can be recognized Hāritī's attack upon Buddha and her ultimate conversion. On the pedestal is an interesting group:

.....  
Below: Painting on the ceiling of the antechamber, Cave 2





Above: Buddha in two different postures, Cave 2

starting from the right we find three attentive boys engaged in writing before a teacher admonishing them with a cudgel; next, two boys are boxing; and lastly, a group of five boys is goading two rams to fight – a realistic representation of the ubiquitous back-benchers and truants.

The left chapel has two corpulent *yakshas* attended by *chāmara*-bearers. Specially interesting is the luxuriant crop of their curly tresses falling on one side, a type of coiffure very common in the sculptures of Ajanta. The façade of

these chapels is relieved with groups of figures in compartments.

The cave contains a number of painted records, though fragmentary. On paleographical basis they have been assigned to the first half of the sixth century AD. The majority of them is found on the walls of the porch to the left of the verandah and quotes verses from the *Kshānti Jātaka*, found in the *Jātaka-mālā*.<sup>1</sup> Apparently, the panel, which has now almost entirely perished, was painted with the story of Bodhisattva, who did not

<sup>1</sup> The *Jātaka-mālā* by Āryasūra, edited by H. Kern (Boston, 1891), pp. 181 ff.



give up his patience and preaching of forbearance in spite of the persecutions of the king of Varanasi.

The cave is remarkable for the survival of most of the ceiling-paintings of the hall, antechamber, shrine, chapels and verandah with side-porches. Like Cave 1, the painting on the ceiling takes the form of compartments filled in with a variety of designs, including floral patterns, birds, fruits, flying figures, fantastic and comic figures and geometric and ornamental motifs. The colour-schemes, however, are different. The central panels are square and are much larger than the

others; their subject is also different. Here we find painted bands of concentric circles with spandrels filled in with different motifs, of which the flying figures are exquisitely rendered. The painting on the ceiling of the shrine is one of the best specimens of the painter's art at Ajanta. No one can but be struck by the keen observation and masterly execution shown by the painter in the delineation of a procession of twenty-three geese in various attitudes, which forms a band of the ceiling-painting of the chapel to the left of the antechamber.

The side-walls of the shrine, walls of the antechamber, part of the left wall of the hall and left half of the back wall, all painted with countless Buddhas in various attitudes, remind one of the 'Cave of the Thousand Buddhas' at Tun Huang (Dunhuang) in Central Asia. As a matter of fact a painted record on the back wall of the antechamber to the right of the shrine-door relates the donation of 'thousand painted Buddhas'.

Also painted here are three large-sized Bodhisattvas, one on the back wall of the hall and two on the front wall of the shrine. Of the latter, the one

to the left of the doorway does not represent Maitreya, but is actually Avalokiteśvara in the role of the saviour of mankind threatened with the Eight Great Perils of lion, elephant, fire, snake, robber, water, fetters and demon.

Of the scenes from the life of Buddha, the nativity is painted on the left wall of the hall between the front pilaster and the third cell-door. The bottom left panel, though much damaged, depicts the bedchamber of Māyā, who dreamt of a white elephant entering her body. The elephant, the form in which Bodhisattva alighted from the Tushita heaven, is not very clear in the panel, as the portion has suffered much. Above the panel is a royal couple – apparently Māyā relating her dream to her husband Śuddhodana.

The next top panel above the cell-door has been interpreted as the Tushita heaven, the abode of Bodhisattva before his descent. The princely figure, with an aureole around his head and seated in the teaching attitude, is Bodhisattva. The panel to its right relates to the interpretation of Māyā's dream. When Māyā related her dream to the king, he sent for the Brāhmaṇas,

who declared that the queen had conceived a son destined to become either a universal monarch (*chakravartin*) or a Buddha. Next, we find a beautiful princess, apparently Māyā (who was believed to have been protected during gestation from all harms by celestials), standing in a pensive mood between two pillars. Below is shown the birth of Buddha: Śakra holds the new-born babe in his arms, while Māyā stands holding the branch of a tree. The seven steps, which Gautama took immediately afterwards are painted to the right of this. The lowest part of the panel has the appearance of having been left unfinished.

The following *Jātakas* are identified. On the extreme left wall of the hall is depicted the *Haṃsa Jātaka* (no. 502). Queen Khemā having seen in her dream a golden goose discoursing the law to her, the king of Varanasi made a decoy-lake, and his fowler succeeded in capturing the golden goose-king (Bodhisattva) and his faithful captain, Sumukha. Both of them were brought to the presence of the royal couple who were satisfied with the discourse and set them free. In the lower panel to the left of the cell-



door, the fowler along with an official is seen approaching the geese in a lotus-lake. A little above, the fowler is going out of the lake after catching hold of the geese. In the top panel the golden goose, seated on a throne, is delivering the sermon to the royal couple. The next scene above the cell is laid in the king's court where Bodhisattva (goose-king in his human form ?) is seen preaching to an assembly. Lower below, to the right of the door, is a lake full of lotuses and lilies in all possible stages of bloom, among which is seen the golden goose.

The *Vidhurapaṇḍita Jātaka* (no. 545) occupies a large portion of the right wall of the hall. In order to gain in marriage the hand of the *nāga* princess

*Above:* Two comical figures on the ceiling, Cave 2

Irandaṭī, Puṇṇaka, the Yaksha general, won Vidhurapaṇḍita (Bodhisattva), the wise minister of the king of Indraprastha, after defeating the latter in a game of dice and, brought him to the *nāga* queen Vimalā, the mother of Irandaṭī, who was pining for the discourse of Vidhurapaṇḍita. On the right half of the composition can be seen Irandaṭī on a swing, Puṇṇaka meeting Irandaṭī and the *nāga* king consulting his kinsmen over Puṇṇaka's proposal of marrying his daughter, while in the left half are depicted the audience-chamber of the king of Indraprastha, the game of



Above: Painted ceiling, Cave 2

dice, Vidhurapaṇḍita's journey with Puṇṇaka, the former's discourse in the *nāga* king's palace and the happy union. Delineated below the *Vidhurapaṇḍita Jātaka*, where Irandatī is on a swing, is the *Pūrṇa Avadāna*.<sup>1</sup> In the bottom left we find Pūrṇa in front of Buddha signifying his conversion. To the right is a boat in danger, and its owner, apparently Bhavila, the brother of Pūrṇa, praying for succour, in response to which an angel, followed by a monk, apparently Pūrṇa, as narrated in the *Avadāna*, comes to his rescue. Above

this is the sandal-wood monastery built by Pūrṇa and said to have been visited by Buddha.

To the left of the *Vidhurapaṇḍita Jātaka*, between the cell-door and the pilaster, is painted the *Ruru Jātaka* (no. 482). Here Bodhisattva, born as a golden deer, having rescued a drowning man, was betrayed by the latter to the king of Varanasi, who had declared a rich reward to the finder of such a deer, as his queen had taken into her head to listen to the sermon of a golden deer seen in her dreams.

Bodhisattva forgave his betrayer and converted the royal couple. Most of this panel has perished. In the bottom the spotted deer is seen carrying a person on

<sup>1</sup> The *Divyāvadāna*, edited by E.B. Cowell and R.A. Neil (Cambridge, 1886), pp.24 ff.



his back. The deer is next shown as standing. Much of the top portion is destroyed, but traces of a female and a male figure are discernible.

The theme of the painting on the right wall of the front aisle above the cell-door cannot be made out, as it has suffered great damages. The kneeling figure of the lady beseeching for mercy, an angry king who is brandishing his sword, is a masterpiece of Indian painting.

The paintings on the walls of the chapels are remarkably well-preserved. Although the subject-matter in both the chapels is almost the same, *viz.*, lady votaries bringing offerings, their treatment, colour-scheme and background are entirely different from each other. The compositions on the walls of the Hāritī chapel are laid amidst a rocky landscape. They have elicited great admiration from art-critics, who designate them as Botticellesque murals.

The paintings on the walls of the verandah of the cave have almost perished, and only small patches, showing portions of gracefully modelled figures, can be seen here and there.

### Cave 3

A modern flight of steps brings the visitor to this incomplete monastery, of which only the preliminary excavation of the pillared verandah was carried out. The work stopped after the scooping out of a rough entrance of the hall.

### Cave 4

This is the largest monastery at Ajanta, planned on an ambitious scale, but never finished. The verandah, supported by eight octagonal pillars with bracket-capitals, has a cell at either end.<sup>1</sup>

The hall has one main entrance and two side-doors with wide windows in between. The decoration of the main door, executed in the style of that of Cave 1 but bolder, is one of the most elaborate to be found at Ajanta. The outermost compartment of the jamb is sculptured with a female figure with an attendant at the bottom, boldly-carved standing couples, flying pairs and *śāla-bhañjikās*. The lintel is decorated with seated figures of Buddha

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<sup>1</sup> An inscription on the pedestal of a Buddha image in the sanctum of Cave 4 states that it was a gift of a person named Māthura, son of Abhayanandin.

and *ganās*, while the topmost band has five *chaitya*-window motifs, three of them containing figures of Buddha. At the upper corners of the door-frame are the bracket-figures of *śārdūlas* with riders. To the right of the door is a rectangular panel carved with a standing figure of Avalokiteśvara at the centre, with worshippers praying to him for deliverance from the Eight Great Perils (see p.42). The Bodhisattva holds in his *jaṭā-mukuta* a Dhyāni-Buddha in the *dharma-chakra-pravartana-mudrā* (teaching pose) and not in the appropriate *dhyāna* (meditation) attitude. It is clear, therefore, that iconographical canons had not yet crystallized into rigid forms. In the two top corners of the panel are two seated figures of Buddha, with a third one above within a *chaitya*-window. To the other side of the door can be seen another panel carved with the figure of Buddha in the teaching attitude. The jambs and the lintel of the windows are also delicately carved.

The hall has twenty-eight pillars, arranged in a square, which with the exception of a few richly-carved columns on the back

row, are similar to those in the verandah. On the three sides of the hall are hewn a number of cells, many of which can be seen at different stages of excavation.

The shrine, relieved with the figures of Buddha at places, has also a colossal image of Buddha in teaching attitude flanked by Vajrapāṇi and Padmapāṇi the latter with an *ajina*. In front of the seat is a congregation of devotees, including monks. The door-jambs and lintel are decorated with figures of Buddha. The walls of the antechamber are carved with six gigantic standing figures of Buddhas, two of them unfinished, with the right hands in the *abhaya-mudrā* and the left holding the hem of the garment. These figures of Buddha along with those in the shrine originally bore paintings, traces of which still linger in patches. The verandah was also once painted.

The cave is ascribable to the first half of the sixth century AD on the basis of the palaeography of the dedicatory inscription on the pedestal of the Buddha-image.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Epigraphia Indica*, XXXIII (1960), p.259

## Cave 5

Hewn at a lower level, this monastery was also left unfinished. Its richly-carved doorway, with female figures standing on *makaras* projecting beyond the general alignment, deserves notice.

## Cave 6

This is a double-storeyed monastery. The verandah of the lower storey has entirely disappeared.

A cistern can be seen at the right end. Much of the decoration of the doorway has crumbled; below the recesses at the top extremities, which apparently contained some sculptures, is a pilaster with a pot-and-foilage capital and a pot-base, the pedestal being supported by a *yaksha* and an elephant.

The hall was lighted by four broad windows, of which two have now been blocked. The pillars of the hall, instead of being arranged round the sides of a square, are placed in four parallel rows of four each. They are without any base and are octagonal up to about three-fourths of their height, then sixteen-sided and ultimately moulded at the top supporting

imitation-beams. The front and back aisles of the hall are larger than the rest. In this cave there are sixteen cells in all.

Over the door of the sanctuary is an ornamental arch springing from the mouths of *makaras* resting on two carved pilasters supported by *yakshas*. The arch is filled in with a *nāga* having a pot in hand and garland-bearing flying figures. The spandrels are also carved with flying figures.

The figure of Buddha in teaching attitude is detached from the back wall; the latter has a recess at its upper part. The shrine was originally painted with many figures of Buddha, of which hardly anything can now be made out. On the left wall of the ante-chamber is painted the Miracle of Śrāvastī (*see* p. 28) and on the right wall the Assault and Temptation of Māra (*see* p. 26). Much of these paintings has peeled off.

A flight of steps to the right of the hall-door lands the visitor on the upper storey. The lower steps of this stairway are of modern construction. Out of the four pillars of the verandah only the lower half of one has survived. The extant pilaster is relieved with

a medallion having the *makara*-motif at the centre, the projecting end of its bracket-capital having the animated trotting figure of an elephant with two riders. At either end of the verandah is a cell with a pillared porch, the façade of which is carved with figures of Buddha within arched niches.

Outside the verandah at either extremity is a chapel containing an image of Buddha. To the left of the door of the left chapel is a standing figure, much damaged, which originally held an umbrella or standard.

The pillars of the hall, twelve in number, are arranged around a square. They have square bases, octagonal shafts and bracket-capitals.

At the back of the shrine is carved an image of Buddha in preaching attitude. The deer on the pedestal are very realistically executed. The walls of the shrine are carved with a number of standing figures of Buddha. Besides the main shrine, there are two more chapels containing images of Buddha; the one on the right end of the front aisle has its door-jamb painted with beautiful figures of fine execution. Four of the

cells have pillared porches in front; the one on the left end of the front aisle has its façade sculptured with a frieze of elephants of masterly workmanship. The cave has a profusion of carved figures of Buddha in different attitudes on the walls of the hall, antechamber and shrine. One small standing figure on the left wall of the antechamber is so finely covered with a lime-coat that it gives the appearance of marble. On the same wall near the feet of a relief of Buddha is the masterly drawing of a remarkable kneeling figure holding three lotus-buds and a handled cylindrical object with a lid. The upper storey was left somewhat unfinished.

This cave has only one painted record on the left wall of the upper hall. It records the gift by a monk whose name has doubtfully been read as *Taraṇa-kīrttana*.

## Cave 7

The plan of this monastery differs from that of the other monasteries in its not having a hall but two small porticos, each supported in front by two heavy octagonal pillars,

the capitals of which somewhat resemble those of the verandah pillars of Cave 2. The façade is relieved with *chaitya*-windows filled in with a half-lotus or an animal-head. The verandah-pillars

.....  
Below: Miracle of Śrāvastī, Cave 7

have octagonal shafts and bracket capitals. At each end of the verandah, at a higher level, is a pillared porch, which opens into three cells. Outside the verandah is also a cell at each extremity. The shrine has a seated image of Buddha with an elliptical



halo carved on the back wall. There are also six standing figures of Buddha in the *vara-mudrā*, carved on the walls of the shrine. Below them there are seated figures of Buddha. The door-jambes and lintel are similarly decorated with figures of Buddha, the top corners only having female figures on *makaras*; the modelling and pose of the female figures, particularly the left one, are captivating. Both the left and right walls of the antechamber are carved with the Miracle of Śrāvastī. The back walls of the antechamber also have a number of figures of Buddha; the topmost one on the right side, seated on the coil of a seven-hooded *nāga*, most probably represents the incidents of the *nāga* king Muchilinda's providing a shed over Buddha by his hood. The cave was once painted all over, but nothing substantial has survived. Some of the cells and the left porch are left unfinished.

### Cave 8

As already noted (*see p. 9*), this monastery is excavated at the lowest level. Its major part has been swept away by a heavy landslide.



### Cave 9

Oblong on plan, this small *chaitya-griha*, with its well-balanced façade, is divided into a nave, an apse and aisles by a colonnade of twenty-three pillars. At the centre of the apse stands a globular *stūpa* on a high cylindrical base. The crowning members consist of a railing and a *harmikā*, the latter expanded above into the shape of an inverted stepped pyramid.

Over the *harmikā* were wooden umbrellas, as attested by the existence, on the top, of two sockets



meant for receiving the shafts. Except the two pillars near the entrance, the columns are plain slightly-tapering octagons without any base or capital; they support a triforium, from the top of which springs the vaulted ceiling.

In the two central columns and the six pilasters of the door and windows can be seen an effective device of finishing off the arris at the point of transition between the square and octagon – a characteristic feature of the second and first centuries BC.

*Above: Chaitya-arches on the façade of Cave 9*

The ceiling of the aisles, lighted by two small windows, is flat. The vaulted ceiling of the nave and apse was originally braced with superfluous wooden beams and rafters; the holes meant for their insertions can be seen on the top of the triforium. The façade is dominated by a ribbed *chaitya*-window, originally ornamented with wooden lattice-works, a rough idea of which can be gathered from the five *chaitya*-window motifs

above the cornice over the doorway and window.

The *chaitya-griha* has been assigned to the first century BC. The figures of Buddha on the façade and side-walls facing the court were, however, added at a much later date.

Within the cave there are at places two layers of paintings, the earlier going back to the period of the excavation. It was a common practice amongst ancient artists to paint over an existing painting without completely rubbing it off. An idea of the superimposition of the later painting on the earlier one can be had on the inner side of the front wall above the left window and the door and the left wall. At the extreme left of the former we find the heads of two *bhikshus* with a painted record of about the fifth century AD. It is only a part of the later painting covering an older painting, now exposed after the removal of the former. In the older painting can be made out two groups of figures separated from each other by rocks. The left group presents only two *nāgas* seated under a tree in the rocky shelter; the one having multiple cobra-hoods is most probably the *nāga* king. The right group,

which is much damaged, centres round a king, who seems to be listening to the petitions of a group of five persons seated near his throne. A couple is standing to the left of the seated figures, while a flying figure can be seen above hovering towards the assembly. The coiffures, ornaments and costumes of these figures are similar to contemporary reliefs at Sanchi.

Again, in the extreme left panel on the left wall we come across a later painting, the persons of six Buddhas, beyond which we find an earlier painting consisting of a procession of devotees towards a *stūpa* enclosed by walls, the right one pierced by a *torana* closely resembling the gateways of Sanchi. Beyond the gateway is a structure, probably intended for a monastery. Next we find a group of standing persons, beyond which are some secular structures occupied by ladies. The colour-scheme presents a dire contrast to that of the later painting, not to speak of the style and workmanship.

The remnant of another old painting partly survives on the frieze above the left colonnade of the nave, where the movement of animals hotly chased by



herdsmen is very realistically and forcefully portrayed.

The favourite motifs of the later painters are the figures of Buddha in various attitudes. The ceiling of the aisles is decorated with lotuses in panels. Twelve painted records have been noticed here.

Beyond this cave, at a slightly higher level to the right of the modern stairs are two recesses with their walls relieved with the figures of Buddha.

## Cave 10

This is the earliest *chaitya-griha* and most probably the earliest excavation at Ajanta. Apsidal on plan, it is divided into the usual nave, apse and aisles by thirty-nine octagonal pillars supporting the entablature from which the vault of the nave rises. It is much larger than Cave 9. Its floor is approached by a flight of steps. Like Cave 9, its ceiling was originally covered with a network of curvilinear wooden beams and rafters. The ceiling of its aisles, however, differs from that cave in its being a half-arch and having rock-cut beams and rafters in imitation of

wooden prototypes.

The apse has the usual votive *stūpa*, the drum of which rises in two storeys. But for the missing front face which was possibly of timber, it would have been an impressive *chaitya-griha*.

Fortunately there is an inscription, recording the gift of the façade by one Vāsīthiputa Kaṭahādi, on the front to the right of the great *chaitya*-window. The palaeography indicates the beginning of the second century BC as the date of the cave.

Two more donative records, one painted and the other engraved, of the same period, exist inside the cave.

This cave, like the preceding one, contains both the earlier and later groups of paintings. That the hall was painted shortly in the wake of its excavation is proved by a painted record on the paintings itself on the left wall opposite the third pillar.

On palaeographic grounds it has been assigned to the middle of the second century BC, which is, thus, the date of the painting as well. The subject-matter of the painting, though greatly obliterated by modern scribblings can be made

out as the visit and worship of the *Bodhi* tree and the *stūpa* by a royal personage accompanied by his retinue – soldiers, dancers, musicians and ladies. Like the older paintings in Cave 9, the events are composed horizontally in a continuous frieze-like band, a characteristic of the early paintings at Ajanta.

Substantial fragments of the older paintings, superimposed at places by later ones, can also be seen on the right wall. Here two *Jātakas*<sup>1</sup> have been identified. On the left, behind pillars 11 to 15 is depicted the *Sāma Jātaka* (no. 540). Bodhisattva was born in that life as Sāma, the sole support of his blind hermit-parents. One day, while he was filling his pitcher in a river, he was shot accidentally by a poisoned arrow of the king of Varanasi who had been out hunting. Having heard about the helplessness of Sāma's parents, the repentant king offered his services to them. The parents' grief, however, moved a goddess whose solemn asseveration brought Sāma back to life and restored the eyesight of the parents. The main

incidents of the story can be followed in the painting. Commencing on the left, a king, surrounded by his retinue, can be seen shooting an arrow towards Sāma, who holds a pitcher on his left shoulder.

Immediately to the right is the figure of the penitent king. The third scene is in the hermitage, with the sorrowful figures of Sāma's parents, feeling the wounded body of their son. Immediately to the right, Sāma, restored to life, is addressing the king. Further right, one encounters again the king and Sāma, the latter seated under a tree with a pair of deer gazing at him. Next is depicted the leaf-cottage (*parṇa-sālā*) of the hermits.

To the right of the *Sāma Jātaka* is painted the *Chhaddanta Jātaka* (no. 514) in a long horizontal frieze occupying the rest of the wall behind pillars 2 to 12. The story runs thus: Bodhisattva was born as Chhaddanta, a six-tusked royal elephant, and lived near a lake in the Himalayas in the company of his two wives, Mahāsubhaddā and Chullasubhaddā. Thinking that her co-wife was her husband's favourite, Chullasubhaddā conceived a relentless grudge against

<sup>1</sup> Both of them are found represented in later paintings as well in Cave 17

her husband and pined herself to death praying, to be born in her next life as the queen of Varanasi so that she could retaliate on him. In fulfillment of her prayer she was born to become the favourite queen of the king of Varanasi. On the pretext of a feigned illness she induced the king to commission the hunter Sonuttara for bringing the tusks of Chhaddanta. The latter, though wounded by the arrow of the hunter, helped him in sawing off his own tusks. The queen, however, died out of remorse at the sight of the tusks. This painting has suffered much from vandalism. The story is not depicted in a strict chronological order; but the main incidents of the story – Chhaddanta's life in the Himalayas, his favourite resort under the banyan tree, the lotus-lake, his presentation of a lotus to Mahāsubhaddā which enraged Chullasubhaddā, Subhaddā (queen of Varanasi) feigning illness and directing Sonuttara about the whereabouts of Chhaddanta, Sonuttara spying the elephant from the rocks, his sawing off the tusks and bringing them to the presence of Subhaddā and the latter's swoon at the sight of the tusks – can

easily be followed. The painting ends with a scene in which a royal couple, followed by maids, is approaching a *chaitya-griha*.

Like Cave 9, the theme of the later paintings is mostly figures of Buddha. The cave contains the largest number of painted records.

Slightly higher up, to the right of the modern flight leading from Cave 10 to Cave 11, is a recess, its back wall relieved with an image of Buddha in the *bhadrāsana* pose. On the right wall is depicted Avalokiteśvara approached by devotees in Eight Great Perils (*see p. 42*) while on the left wall are several figures of Buddha and one of a female divinity, the latter standing in the *sāmapāda* pose with the stalk of a damaged lotus in her left hand.

## Cave 11

The clumsiness of the pillars and the irregularity of the cells stamp the monastery as the initial product of the structural revival, dating from the beginning of the fifth century AD or even earlier. Approach to the verandah, the high plinth and parapet of which are decorated

with a railing-pattern, is provided by a flight of steps. The pillars of the verandah have square bases of unequal heights, octagonal shafts and bracket-capitals. At each end there are two cells, entered by steps, the outer cells having collapsed. The right wall of the verandah is carved with figures of Buddha in three panels. The windows are each partitioned by two pillars. The door is plainly moulded with a lion-head at each end of the threshold.

The ceiling of the hall is supported on four pillars having moulded bases, tapering octagonal shafts and pot-with-lotus-petal capitals. The back and the left walls have three cells each, and a bench runs throughout the entire length of the right wall. The cave has no antechamber, and the shrine, with an image of Buddha in teaching attitude carved against an unfinished *stūpa*, is also somewhat unfinished. The plinth, on which rests the *siṃhāsana* of Buddha, contains the kneeling figure of a devotee. Higher up, in the left wall is hewn out a secret chamber, probably for keeping valuables.

The ceiling of the verandah along with its

projection is covered with painted motifs including varied flora, birds, beasts and geometric designs.

A painted version of the quadripartite deer of Cave 1 (*see* p. 24) is noteworthy. The back walls of the verandah immediately to the left and right of the door are painted with large-sized Bodhisattvas with attendants, large portions of the paintings being damaged. The walls of the hall are painted mostly with figures of Buddha. Two painted records have been noticed so far.

## Cave 12

This monastery is one of the earliest, if not the earliest, at Ajanta.

Its front wall has entirely disappeared. The astylar hall, nearly 11 m square and with a flat ceiling, opens into twelve cells ranged on three sides. The walls of the hall above the cell-doors are ornamented with *chaitya*-window motifs connected at places by a railing-motif, the right wall being further decorated with stepped merlons of Assyrian pattern. Each cell has two beds. The holes in the sills and lintels for pivot-hinges prove that they were

originally provided with single-leafed wooden doors. On the back wall, to the left of the right corner cell, is a Brāhmī inscription recording the gift of the merchant Ghanāmadāḍa, and belonging to a date slightly later than that of the record of Vāsīthiputa Kaṭahādi in Cave 10.

The monastery once bore paintings, of which hardly anything now exists.

### Cave 13

As already noted, this small monastery belongs to the earlier complex. Its front has perished. The astylar hall has seven cells on three sides, each provided with two stone beds; one cell has raised stone pillows as well. The cells, like those of Cave 12, are so narrow that it is quite likely that they only served as dormitories. There is no trace of the cave having ever been painted.

### Cave 14

This monastery was excavated over Cave 13 at a higher level. It is reached through an incomplete cave by an ancient staircase. Planned on a large scale, it was left unfinished. The

decoration of the pillars of the verandah differs from that of any other pillars at Ajanta. The top corner of the central doorway leading to the unfinished hall is adorned with beautifully-modelled figures of *śāla-bhañjikās* with attendants.

### Cave 15

The pillars of the verandah of this monastery have fallen leaving only the moulded plinth. The lintel of the doorway is carved in the form of two tiers of a *śikhara*. At the centre of the lower tier is a *stūpa* under the canopy of serpent-hoods, while the upper tier has at its centre a *chaitya*-window motif flanked by a pair of pigeons carved in a most realistic manner. The astylar hall has on two of its sides eight cells. The back wall to the left of the antechamber bears figures of Buddha in two panels. The pillars of the antechamber have moulded plinths and shafts, first, square, then octagonal, next sixteen-sided and finally returning to square through octagon without any capital. The back wall of the shrine is carved with an image of Buddha seated on a *siṃhāsana*. That the cave was originally painted

can easily be guessed from the patches of plaster sticking to the ceiling of the hall and traces of painting on the ceiling of the antechamber and shrine.

### Cave 15A

Descending by the flight of steps between Caves 14 and 15 to the lower terrace, one finds to the right a small monastery consisting of a central astylar hall flanked by a cell on each of its three sides. The damaged front wall, originally decorated with the railing-design, is pierced with a single door and has on its right an inscription in shell-characters as on one of the pillars of Cave 9. The walls of the hall above the cell-doors are relieved with motifs like *chaitya*-windows rising from railings, above which is a running moulding relieved with a row of stepped pyramids. The narrow cells, each with a door, have on their three-sides platforms to serve as beds. The left cell has an oblong recess cut into one of the platforms.

The front door was found deliberately bricked up. Above the railing on the façade are the reliefs of *chaitya*-window motifs, the central one being above the entrance-door of the cave.

### Cave 16

Beyond Cave 15 A is a door flanked by an elephant in relief (*see* p. 12) on either side and facing the sculpture of a *nāga* king seated on his coils. A stairway to the left leads

.....  
*Below:* Flying couple, front corridor of main-hall, Cave 16



to the front court of Cave 16, one of the most beautiful monasteries at Ajanta, combining elegance and architectural vigour. Its importance is further increased by an inscription incised on the left side-wall outside the verandah, furnishing the history of its excavation. The inscription records the dedication of

the magnificent dwelling (*veśma*), excavated in the hill, for the use of the best of ascetics by Varāhadeva, the minister of the Vākāṭaka king Harishena (*circa* AD 475-500). We are further told that the dwelling was adorned with windows, doors, beautiful picture-galleries (*vīthi*), statues of celestial nymphs,



ornamental pillars and stairs and had a shrine (*chaitya-mandira*) and a *mandapa*. It was also provided with a large reservoir and a dwelling of the lord of the *nāgas*. The cave bears out all the details given in the inscription.

The hall has twenty pillars. Except the middle pair in the front and back rows, which have square bases and shafts first octagonal, next sixteen-sided and then square, they are plain slightly-tapering octagons without any base. The pillars of the front and back rows have bracket-capitals. The front aisle is longer than the others, and its ceiling is carved in imitation of wooden rafters and beams, their ends again supported by the bracket-figures of dwarfs (*gaṇas*), musicians and flying couples. These figures are shown in varied moods, a few groaning under weight, some serious, others taking it lightly and still others enjoying it. Specially interesting are the two flying couples, noted for their graceful poise and features. On three sides of the hall are fourteen recessed cells.

There is no antechamber leading to the shrine, which has two side-aisles with

pillars and pilasters – again a novel feature. The side-aisles are lighted by a door and a window above it from the back side of the hall. The front pillars of the shrine, with fluted rectangular shafts, are richly carved.

The gigantic image of Buddha in teaching attitude, seated in the *pralamba-pāda*, posture, is carved in high relief and has a circumambulatory passage round it. The back-slab is carved with the upper parts of attending *chāmara*-bearers, *makaras* and *gaja-vyāla* motifs.

To the left of this monastery at a higher level, approached by a flight of steps, is a large cistern with a narrow mouth.

Unfortunately most of the paintings have disappeared now. Of the few surviving compositions, the piece immediately after the front pilaster of the left wall of the hall is noted for the masterly depiction of the pathos and sentiments in the fainting of a beautiful princess at the sight of a crown held by a servant. She is identified with Sundarī, the wife of Nanda, the latter's conversion forming the subject of this panel. On his first visit to Kapilavastu Buddha went for alms to the house of his



half-brother Nanda, who was at that time busy in helping his wife in her toilet. When Nanda came out to meet Buddha, the latter gave him his begging-bowl and took him to the monastery, where, much against his will, he was ordained.

In order to cure Nanda of his lovesickness Buddha took him to heaven and showed him beautiful nymphs, promising them to him if he practised his religious exercises. On return Nanda applied himself rigorously to self-control and practice of religious life with the sole object of attaining the nymphs.

The ridicule of other monks, however, brought him to his senses and ultimately he became an *arhat*. Though the panel is much damaged, Nanda's tonsure, his sorrow at his forcible ordination and his journey through the air in the company of Buddha are easy of identification.

After the scene of Nanda's conversion abruptly comes a panel containing seated figures of Buddha in two rows. This painting was done at a later date. Beyond this is a panel representing Buddha seated in teaching attitude on a *siṃhāsana* decorated with lion-heads. The flying female above the head of

Buddha is notable for her movement and modelling.

In the damaged painting on the back wall to the left of the shrine, between the cell-door and the door of the left aisle, can be recognized the Miracle of Śrāvastī (see p. 28). Next is painted an elephant-procession, signifying some royal visit, of which hardly anything substantial remains. On the back wall to the right of the shrine, above the door of the right aisle and the cell-door, is depicted Buddha preaching to the congregation.

The right wall is devoted to the illustration of incidents from the life of Buddha. Though the painting is much darkened and effaced, some of the incidents can be easily made out, e.g., Sujātā's offering of *pāyasa*, the offering of Trapusha and Bhallika, Buddha with his begging-bowl on the street of a town (Rājagṛīha?), a royal (Bimbisāra's?) visit, Gautama's first meditation during the ploughing festival, the prediction of Asita, Gautama at school and his practice of archery. To the extreme right of the panel can be seen the sleeping figure of Māyā, to the left of which in a circular pavilion, is a royal couple, apparently

Śuddhodana and Māyā, conversing over the prospect of the dream which the latter had. The three-dimensional effect of the pavilion is noteworthy.

Of the *Jātakas*, two can be recognized on the front wall of the hall near the left corner and the left wall of the front aisle. The first depicts the *Hasti Jātaka*,<sup>1</sup> where Bodhisattva, born as a benevolent elephant, flung himself down to death from the top of a precipice to serve as food to hungry travellers, who are seen in the left panel making a feast on the elephant's carcass. The second shows certain episodes from the *Mahā-ummagga Jātaka* (no. 546), where the supernatural child Mahosadha adjudicated disputes.

On the top is the tank of Mahosadha, who is talking to a group of four persons. Below this, a little to the left, is the representation of the 'riddle of the son', where Mahosadha was called upon to settle the dispute between a woman and a goblin over the motherhood of a child. Mahosadha asked both of them to drag the child towards herself; the mother seeing the child in pain,

desisted from her effort, and this enabled Mahosadha to find out the real mother. A popular version of this story, in which the judge ordered the boy to be cut into two, so that the disputants could have equal parts, is depicted here. Lower down, to the right, is the 'riddle of the chariot', where two persons claimed a chariot, and Mahosadha declared the rightful owner by a simple test. The adjoining pilaster delineates the 'riddle of the cotton-thread', where a woman stole a ball of thread belonging to another when the latter was bathing in the tank of Mahosadha. Mahosadha asked what object had been put inside the ball, and thus the rightful owner was identified.

Fragments of the *Mahā-Sutasoma Jātaka*,<sup>1</sup> also represented in Cave 17 (see p. 71) can be seen on the architrave above the front pillars of the verandah. A lion is seen licking the feet of a sleeping person.

From the traces of the painting on the ceiling of the central nave it is clear that the design differed from others in its having bigger panels filled in with concentric decorative bands.

<sup>1</sup> The *Jātaka-mālā*, pp. 200 ff.

<sup>1</sup> The *Jātaka-mālā*, pp. 207 ff; also *Jātaka* no. 537.



## Cave 17

As indicated by an inscription incised on the left wall outside the verandah, this magnificent monastery owes its origin to the piety of a feudatory of the Vākāṭaka king Harishaṇa. Below the inscription and overlooking a cistern, mentioned in the inscription but now closed, are figures of Buddha in relief. Similar on plan to the contemporaneous Cave 16, the shrine has, however, no side-aisles but has an antechamber.

Except the two central columns in the front and back rows, the pillars of the hall are simple octagons with bracket-capitals. The former are elaborately carved, the two middle ones of the back row having the

*Above: Yaksha-couple on the door-lintel, Cave 17*

greatest ornamentation. The base of the latter is supported by eight figures of lions, seated back-to-back, but with four heads.

The doorway of the shrine is elaborately carved in several compartments with floral designs, figures of Buddha, female door-keepers, scroll-work, twisted-rope design, pilasters and lotus-petal. Particularly pleasing are the females standing on *makaras* in the corner-projections. The decoration of the pillars and pilasters of the antechamber is also very ornate. The back-slab of the image of Buddha, seated in teaching attitude, is detached from the back wall of the shrine. Buddha

is here flanked, as usual, by the figures of Padmapāṇī and Vajrapāṇī holding *chāmaras*. Two additional figures, one of them holding a bowl, stand on the floor near the corners of the pedestal, which is relieved with the *dharma-chakra* between two deer.

The pillars of the verandah have moulded bases and bracket-capitals. A stairway immediately outside the verandah leads down towards the defile.

This monastery, which has preserved the greatest number of murals, is noted for a number of master-pieces. The topmost panel on the doorway depicts the figures of seven Mānushi-Buddhas<sup>1</sup> together with Maitreya, the Future Buddha, seated under their respective *Bodhi* trees. Below them is a representation of eight amorous couples.

The panel to the left of the doorway on the back wall of the verandah is much damaged, but on the left of the fairly well-preserved upper part can be seen the king of the gods flying amidst clouds with his troupe of celestial nymphs (*apsaras*) and musicians. The weightless soaring movements and

litheness of the figures are very effectively drawn. The figure of the flute-player with her back turned specially exhibits the skill and imagination of the artist in drawing his subject in different poses. A little to the right on a rocky ledge is a pair of *kinnaras*.

The next scene on the left shows a princely couple seated at ease within a pillared porch, the prince offering his consort a cup of wine. The pose of the lady is particularly charming. Next, the same couple proceeds towards a city-gate in a sad and pensive mood. Beyond the gate is a prince engaged in distributing alms. The large assemblage of beggars, mendicants and ascetics offers a study of different characters in various attitudes. These scenes are reminiscent of the *Vessantara Jātaka* (no. 547) where Vessantara, before proceeding on banishment, disclosed the news of his exile to his wife and performed his gift of 'seven hundreds'.

The subject on the left wall of the verandah is unique in conception. The gigantic but damaged wheel, upheld by a pair of green hands, may be appropriately termed the 'Wheel of Life', as its

<sup>1</sup> They are Vipasyin, Sikhin, Viśvabhu, Krakuchchanda, Kanakamuṇi, Kāśyapa and Śākyamuṇi.



compartments delineate Life in its various roles.<sup>1</sup> Below it is the fragmentary figure, in green, of Mañibhadra whose name is also recorded. The wall at

<sup>1</sup> This wheel has been supposed, on Tibetan analogy, to represent the Buddhist doctrine of 'Causation', L.A. Waddell in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, 1894, pp. 367 ff.

*Above: Apsara, Cave 17*

right angles to this wall represents the Buddhist litany to Avalokiteśvara against the Eight Great Perils (*see* p. 42). The damaged figure of Avalokiteśvara holds a vessel in the left hand.

The figures of *apsaras* in the panel to the right of the

door eloquently bespeak the consummate skill of the painter even in their damaged condition.

Specially attractive is the figure of the *apsaras* with a turban-like head-gear.

The panel further right depicts the subjugation of Nālāgiri by Buddha, one of the Eight Great Miracles of the life of Buddha.

Devadatta, the jealous cousin of Buddha, in league with King Ajātaśatru of Magadha, plotted a number of murderous attacks on Buddha. Once he let loose against Buddha an infuriated elephant called Nālāgiri on the streets of Rājagṛiha. But the elephant, on reaching Buddha, prostrated, and Buddha stroked his head with great compassion. In the panel can be seen the king's palace, where Devadatta is conspiring with Ajātaśatru, a street of Rājagṛiha with its shops, the maddened elephant causing great havoc and alarm among the citizens and his ultimate submission at the feet of Buddha.

The right wall of the verandah depicts Buddha preaching to the congregation. The ceiling of the verandah is painted with various designs in compartments. The central panel of the ceiling of the

verandah has a group of six figures, their hands arranged in such a way that though each figure has one hand only it gives the appearance of having two hands.

The walls of the hall of the monastery are all embellished with various *Jātakas*. Starting from the front wall to the left of the main entrance is seen the *Chhaddanta Jātaka*, a version of which we have already met with in an early painting of Cave 10 (see p. 54). Though much of this panel has peeled off and the incidents are not painted in a chronological order,<sup>1</sup> the main themes of the story can easily be followed.

In the top left corner is the bedroom of the queen, who, on the pretext of illness, is plotting over the death of Chhaddanta. In the lowest panel the royal elephant, along with the herd, is disporting in a lotus-lake. On the right, a hunter couple watches the elephant from a rock infested with monkeys. On the extreme top the hunter Sonuttara aims his arrow at the elephant.

<sup>1</sup> It was a common practice with the artists of Ajanta to group the episodes of a story according to the place of their occurrence and not according to their sequence.

Lower down Sonuttara is paying obeisance to the benevolent elephant and is next proceeding towards the capital. To the left of this comes the denouement, when the queen, lying on a bed supported by the king, dies at the sight of the tusks.

The next scene, the *Mahākapi Jātaka* I (no. 407), is painted over the window and the space between the

.....  
*Below: Painting on the ceiling of the verandah, Cave 17*

window and small door. Bodhisattva, born as the king of monkeys, lived with his retinue on the bank of the Gāngā and ate the fruits of a mango tree, to get the delicious fruits of which king Brahmadata of Varanasi besieged it. Finding his troops in imminent danger of death, Bodhisattva made a bridge partly by means of a bamboo-shoot and partly by stretching his own body for the safe escape of his followers. His rival



Devadatta, also born as a monkey, finding it an opportunity to crush him, jumped on his body with such a spring that it broke his heart. Brahmadata, touched by the spirit of self-sacrifice, gently brought him down. Before his death Bodhisattva gave the king an instructive discourse. To the left of the door is painted a river, full of fish and aquatic animals, in which some persons are bathing. On the left is the king on horseback, accompanied by his armed followers, some of whom are aiming arrows towards the monkeys. On the extreme top the monkeys are escaping over the stretched body of Bodhisattva, who is seen again below in a blanket held by the king's attendants. Above the window, the monkey is seen preaching to the king.

The indistinct panel beyond the side-door represents the *Hasti Jātaka*, which also occurs in Cave 16 (see p. 62). The hungry wayfarers are seen busy over the carcass of the benevolent elephant who was none else than Bodhisattva.

The next panel on the left wall is divided vertically into two scenes, the upper depicting a court-

scene and the lower a king holding a sword within a pavilion, has not been identified.

The subject matter of the next panel, which continues on the adjoining face of the pilaster, is the *Harisa Jātaka* (see p. 42). The figure of the fowler emerging with two geese from the lotus-lake is seen on the pilaster. The flight of the panic-stricken geese is worth noticing. The second episode is laid in the court of the king of Varanasi, who, with his queen and attendants, is listening to the discourse of Bodhisattva. The two geese are seen seated on thrones.

The *Vessantara Jātaka* (no. 547) covers the entire left wall between the two pilasters. Bodhisattva, born as prince Vessantara, was an incarnation of generosity and charity. His father, king Sañjaya, was forced by his subjects to banish him to Mount Vamka, as he had given away a supernatural elephant, gifted with the power of causing rain, to the Brāhmaṇas of Kaliṅga, which was suffering from drought.

Vessantara left the capital with his wife, son and daughter in a chariot. On his way he gave away first his horses and next his chariot to supplicants and arrived on foot at the hill,





Above: *Haṃsa Jātaka*, Cave 17

where he lived with his family in a hermitage provided by the god Śakra. The prince next made a gift of his children to a Brāhmaṇa called Jūjaka and even gave away his wife Maddī to Śakra disguised as a Brāhmaṇa. Śakra, however, gave her back, and through his grace Vessantara was reunited

with his father and children.

The story starts at the extreme left, where Vessantara breaks the news of his banishment to Maddī. The main incidents that follow – Vessantara's farewell to his father and mother, his drive with his family in a chariot of four horses through a bazar-street, his life in the hermitage, his gift of the

children to Jūjaka in the absence of Maddī, detained away from the hermitage by wild animals, the redeeming of the children by their grandfather on payment of a heavy ransom and the return of Maddī and Vessantara to the capital – are clearly discernible despite the bad preservation of the painting.

Below : Scene from *Vessantara Jātaka*, Cave 17

On the lower half of the wall between the back pilaster and the cell-door is the representation of the *Mahākapi Jātaka* II (no. 516), where Bodhisattva, born as a monkey, hauled a husbandman out of a deep abyss into which the latter had fallen while roaming in a forest in search of his strayed oxen. The ungrateful man made an attempt on the life of his saviour, while asleep, by flinging a stone at him.



Notwithstanding this ungrateful act Bodhisattva showed him the way out. The story commences at the bottom right corner, where the husbandman is seen perched upon a tree. Next, he is on the back of the monkey who is lifting him up from the pit. Above this is the malevolent person on the point of throwing a stone on the sleeping monkey, who evidently jumped aside in time, as his figure on the right shows.

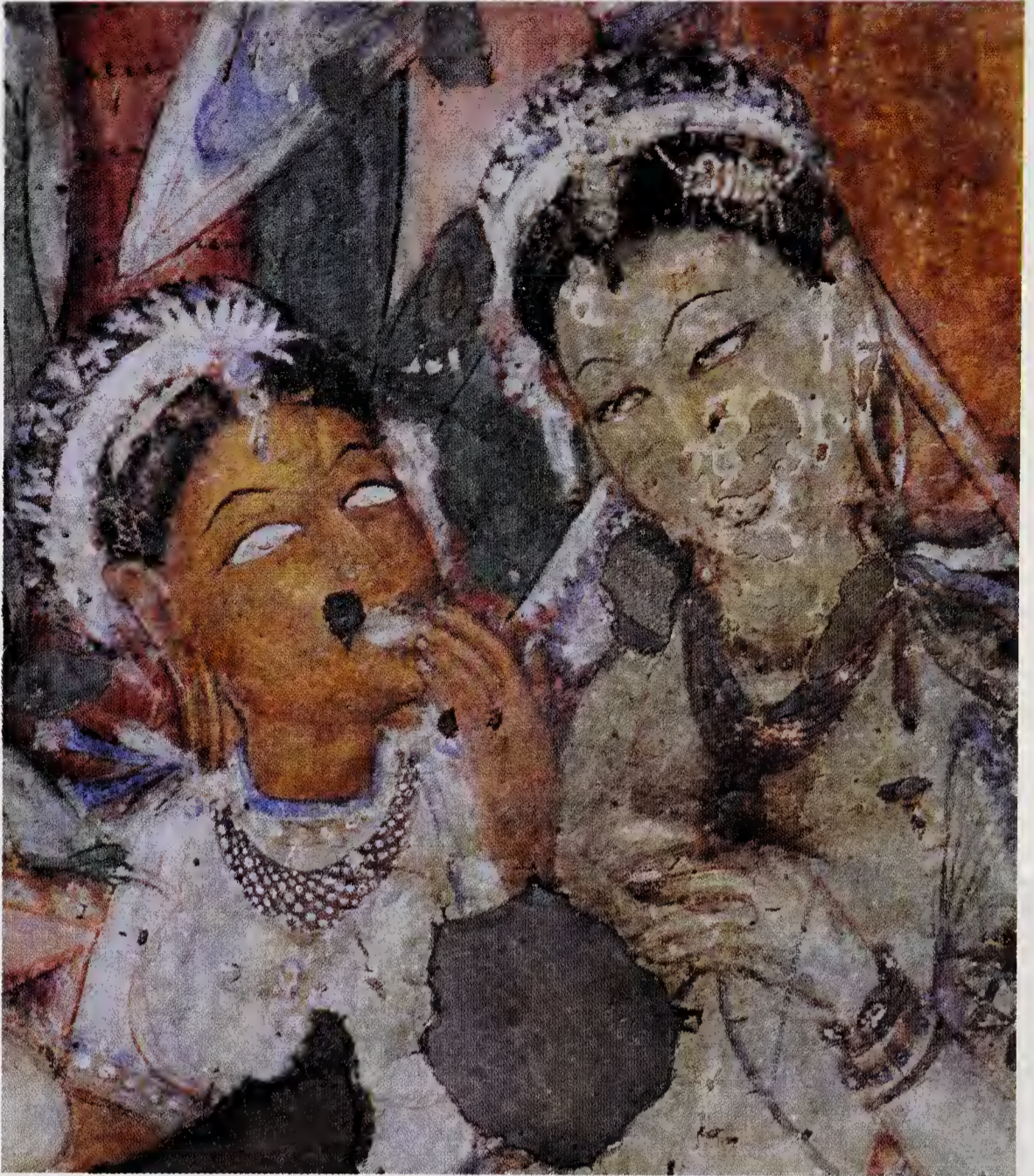


On the left the monkey is being approached by the penitent husbandman.

The battle-scene above this may be related to the *Mahā-Sutasoma Jātaka* (no. 537), the subject-matter of the back wall to the left of the antechamber. In this *Jātaka* Bodhisattva, born as Sutasoma, prince of the Kuru kingdom, cured Saudāsa, son of king Sudāsa born of a lioness,<sup>1</sup> of his cannibalism.

The different episodes in this complex composition are not depicted in a proper sequence. The story starts from the bottom right corner between the first and the second cell-doors where the figure of king Sudāsa emerges on horseback from the city-gate. He is out on a hunting expedition and is accompanied by his retinue including a pack of hounds, unnaturally drawn, chasing the deer. Next is the lonely figure of the king on horseback in a forest infested with animals, above which is a lioness licking the feet of the sleeping king, who is seen, further above, seated on a rock with the lioness in front. A little above, towards the right is the march of the lioness towards the palace-gate through a bazar-street

<sup>1</sup> The lioness-episode is told in the *Jātaka-mālā*, p. 209.



*Above* : Scene from *Vessantara Jātaka*, Cave 17

.....  
 amidst astonished spectators. In the extreme right corner the lioness is ushered into the presence of the king, who has taken the child on his lap. Below this is delineated the education of the prince Saudāsa: on the right he is writing on a tablet and on the left is practicing the throwing of javelins. To the left of this is shown the coronation of Saudāsa. His cannibalism indicated in the three adjoining scenes in which are shown the cutting of

flesh from an impaled man, the cooking of the flesh so acquired and the king being served with it. Immediately above the panel representing Sudāsa leaving for hunt is seen a victim escaping from the royal cook. Above this is the appeal of the subjects to Saudāsa to give up his pernicious habit.

Saudāsa's valiant stand against the attacking force is drawn below the javelin-throwing scene. The episodes after his banishment in the forest, which occupies the left side of the composition, are

obscured by damage.

Bodhisattva Sutasoma, who was one of the one hundred and one princes' captured by Saudāsa for a holocaust and was responsible for the latter's eventual conversion, can be seen on the shoulder of Saudāsa at the time of his capture in a lotus-lake.

On the back wall to the right of the antechamber can be recognized four *Jātaka* representations. The one occupying the major portion of the upper half is the *Sarabha-miga Jātaka* (no. 483), where Bodhisattva born as a stag, rescued the king of Varanasi, who had fallen into a deep pit while pursuing the former. The hunting party appears in the middle portion, while on the right is seen the stag, first practising with a stone to enable him to carry the weight of the king and next carrying the king himself on his back.

To the right of the *Sarabha-miga Jātaka* is the *Machchha Jātaka* (no. 75), where Bodhisattva, in his fish-incarnation, made the king of gods cause rainfall by a solemn profession of goodness in order to save his kinsfolk, being devoured by birds during a drought. In the much-damaged panel the figure of a big fish, surrounded by a number of smaller ones

and other aquatic animals in a pond, is still visible.

Below the *Sarabha-miga Jātaka*, between the two cell-doors, is the representation of the *Māti-posaka Jātaka* (no. 455). Bodhisattva, born as an elephant, once carried a strayed forester on his back out of the forest. The state elephant having died, the king of Varanasi caught Bodhisattva following the clue given by the forester. In the palace the animal refused all nourishment thinking of the helplessness of his blind mother, to whom he was greatly attached. Moved to pity the king released him. On the top panel, on the right side, the elephant is seen refusing the proffered food. In the lower panel, on the extreme left, he is being led by the retinue of the king, above which is delineated the happy return of the joyous animal. In the extreme right he is seen bathing his fondling parents.

The next *Jātaka*, beyond the cell-door, is the *Sāma Jātaka* (see p. 54). At the bottom is shown the devoted Sāma carrying his old blind parents in slings suspended from a bamboo-rod placed across his shoulder. Above, the king is carrying Sāma, who is next shown as preaching to the king. The topmost panel

depicts Sāma with his pitcher in a lotus-lake.

The *Mahisa Jātaka* (no. 278) is painted on the right wall to the left of the cell-door. Bodhisattva, in his birth as a buffalo, used to rest under a tree and suffered a monkey who tortured him with impunity. Once another buffalo happened to stand under the same tree. The monkey started his usual cruel pranks but was thrown away and trampled to death. On the bottom the monkey is seen putting his hands on the eyes of Bodhisattva; above the monkey, now thrown down is looking with awe at the fierce buffalo.

The right wall between the two pilasters depicts with great effect one of the largest compositions – the story of Simhala's conquest of Sri Lanka as narrated in the *Divyāvadāna*,<sup>1</sup> supplemented by some details from the *Valāhassa Jātaka* (no. 196). The story begins at the bottom right end, where the shipwreck in the voyage of Simhala, accompanied by five hundred other merchants, is drawn. Above are shown the merchants, cast ashore, on an island of *rākshasīs* (ogresses) being entertained

by the latter, who have assumed beautiful forms to entice them. Simhala, apprehending danger, accepted the offer of Bodhisattva, born as a horse, who carried back the former along with some of his companions. The flight of the horse is shown above the scenes of revelry. After alighting near a gateway Simhala is seen kneeling before the horse in gratitude. Those companions of Simhala, who failed to resist the fascinations of the lovely ogresses and stayed behind, were devoured by the *rākshasīs*, who now assumed their real forms, as seen in the panel. One of the *rākshasīs*, disguised as a beautiful woman, pursued Simhala to his place with a child and claimed him as her husband. Thwarted by him she approached the king, who became enamoured of her beauty and took her as his wife. The tragic appearance of the minister in the court-scene suggests that he failed in his attempt to dissuade the king from his hasty action, the result of which is shown on the extreme left, where the king is being devoured by the ogress, and other *rākshasīs* are seen killing the inmates of the palace. Vultures

<sup>1</sup> The *Divyāvadāna*, pp. 523-28.



hovering over the closed palace-gate alarmed the people, but Simhala climbed up the palace-wall by a ladder and chased the ogresses out.

The crossing of the sea by the army of Simhala, who later led an expedition to the land of the ogresses to punish them, and the ensuing battle are depicted between the second and the third cell-doors. Above this is the celebration of the coronation of Simhala, who ultimately became the king

*Above: Part of story of Simhalāvadāna, Cave 17*

of the island. The benevolent horse, the saviour of Simhala, is also introduced in this scene.

The pilaster next to this episode contains the famous toilet-scene, a masterpiece of the painter's brush-work. The adjoining wall introduces the *Sibi Jātaka* (no. 499), where king Sibi made a gift of his eyes to Śakra, disguised as a blind Brāhmaṇa. The world

*Sibirājā* is written at three places below the royal figures. On the bottom panel to the left of the cell-door is seen the figure of Sibi, surrounded by courtiers and ladies, taking the solemn vow of giving his limbs to any suppliant. The figure of Śakra, who thought of testing the king is discernible in the left top corner. The corresponding

.....  
*Below: Toilet-scene, Cave 17*

panel to the right of the cell-door represents Sibi undergoing acute pain at the extraction of his eyes to be given to the blind Brāhmaṇa. The expression of the ladies witnessing his affliction is effectively drawn. Above this is one of the alms-halls of the king built near the city-gate. The lotus-lake, where the king repaired after the gift of his eyes, is apparently painted on the pilaster, which





shows two princes seated on a lotus in a lake; evidently they are Sibi and Śakra, the latter having now come to restore Sibi's eyesight. The incidents above the first scene represents the return of Sibi to his capital amidst great pomp and rejoicing.

The subject of the next painting covering the front wall to the left of the window has been identified as the *Ruru Jātaka* (no. 482), though the absence of the essential detail of the story, viz., Bodhisattva's saving the merchant's son from drowning himself, may indicate a different identification. Moreover, hunters are represented here as giving out information about the deer to the king, who has proclaimed a reward, as suggested by the figure of a drummer in the top scene. In the bottom scene the king is seen arriving with his retinue and hunters in the forest, the abode of the deer. The king is shown twice, first on horseback and next as standing astonished at the unusual sight of the hunter's hands being miraculously chopped off as soon as the latter attempted to capture the deer – an episode which again does not find place in the *Jātaka* story. The middle

scene depicts the return of the king along with the deer, carried with great honour on a chariot.

The next panel, much effaced, between the two windows, probably depicts the release of a deer from the hunter's snare by a bear, himself shot by the arrow of a hunter, whose hands fall off from his arms in punishment for this evil deed. Like the preceding panel, this relates to some *Jātaka*, which has not yet been traced.

The rest of the wall up to the door contains the *Nigrodhamiga Jātaka* (no. 12). The Banyan Deer (Bodhisattva) and the Branch Deer, along with their respective herds, were entrapped into the royal park of the king of Varanasi, who was fond of deer-flesh. In order to avoid random killing, the members of the herd decided to send a victim each day to the slaughterhouse by casting lots. The lot having once fallen on a pregnant doe, Bodhisattva, who had been granted immunity by the king, offered himself as a substitute. The spirit of sacrifice moved the king so much that he granted immunity to all creatures. The lower part of the painting between the door



and the window depicts the deer in the royal park. In the upper panel the Banyan Deer is seen in the kitchen ready for slaughter. On the right side is the kneeling figure of the astonished cook, who reported the matter to the king, the latter seen again before a pillared apartment near the kitchen-hut, speaking to the deer. The deer is next seen on a throne, presumably delivering sermons to the royal couple seated on the ground. The last scene of the story is depicted above the window, where a *stūpa* and a congregation of birds and animals, apparently expressing their gratitude to Bodhisattva, can be made out. The place where the deer were granted immunity came to be known as Migadāya (Mṛigadāva, modern Sarnath).

The walls of the antechamber are painted with incidents from Buddha's life. The right wall depicts the well-known Miracle of Śrāvastī. The incidents following the Miracle were delineated in three vertical scenes on the left wall: on the top Buddha is preaching the *abhidharma* to his mother in the Trayastrimśa heaven,

.....  
 Left: Buddha in Kapilavastu,  
 Cave 17

where he repaired after the Miracle; in the middle is his descent at Śāmkāśya from that heaven in the company of Śakra and Brahmā by means of stairs provided by Śakra; down below is the great assembly Sāmkāśya, where Buddha made known to the world the wisdom of Sāriputra, his premier disciple, by putting him more and more difficult questions. The group of devotees on the left side includes the figures of a number of foreigners.

The back wall of the antechamber, to the left of the door, depicts Buddha's wife putting forward Rāhula, the latter begging his patrimony of Buddha who puts forward his begging-bowl.

The scheme of the ceiling decoration of the nave is different from its counterpart elsewhere in that instead of being divided into small individual panels, the designs here are arranged in a unified pattern.

## Cave 18

This is merely a rectangular excavation, having two pillars with moulded bases and octagonal shafts and leading into another cell, mostly collapsed.

## Cave 19

This small but singularly well-proportioned *chaitya-griha*<sup>1</sup> is one of the most perfect specimens of Buddhist rock-cut architecture. Though separated in date from the earlier *chaitya-grihas* by several centuries, being a product of the end of the fifth century AD, it orthodoxly maintains the older plan with the only innovations that the image of Buddha is now introduced on the votive *stūpa* and elaborate ornamentation has been restored to in the different members. The imitation of wooden adjuncts still persists in the stone ribs of the vaulted ceiling, but the actual use of wood in beams, rafters and crowning umbrellas has been eliminated.

Of the seventeen interior pillars, thirteen resemble those of Cave 1, both in workmanship and design, their capitals having the seated figures of Buddha at the centre and the projecting brackets

.....  
*Right: Façade, Cave 19*

<sup>1</sup> The *gandhakuṭi* made by the feudatory of the Vākāṭaka king Harishena to the west of Cave 17, noted in the inscription of Cave 17, possibly refers to this cave.







being occupied by elephants or *śārdūlas* with riders, flying couples, hermits and musicians. The capitals of the remaining four pillars in the front row resemble those of the pillars of the verandah of Cave 2, and the two front pillars are further distinguished by the bracket-figures of *śālabhañjikās*. The triforium is relieved with the figures of standing and seated Buddha in compartments, separated by panels of scroll-work interwoven with animal and human figures. The votive *stūpa*, with an elaborate and elongated drum and a globular dome, is carved with the figure of Buddha standing under an arch which springs from the mouths of *makaras* resting on pilasters. Its crowning elements consist of a *harmikā* and three diminishing *chhatrāvalīs* supported by figures and surmounted by a finial in the shape of a small *stūpa* with a miniature *harmikā* almost touching the vault. From the top of the lower *harmikā* hang garlands. The floor of the apse is slightly higher than that of the nave, its front corners being guarded originally by two

standing figures emerging from the corresponding pillars, of which only the leg-portions are now present. The ceiling of the aisles is flat.

The exquisitely decorated façade of the cave, with a small but elegant pillared portico and projected ornate cornice, dominated by the *chaitya*-window flanked by corpulent figures of *yakshas* against a background of delicately-carved friezes, is magnificent in conception and workmanship – a combination of richness of details and graceful proportions. The façade and



Left: *Chaitya-griha*, Cave 19

Right: *Yaksha*, façade of Cave 19

the side-walls are relieved with a balanced array of multiple figures of Buddha, of which the two standing ones, immediately flanking the entrance, with ornate crowns held over their heads by flying *gaṇas* distinctly foreshadow the crowned Buddhas of the later period.

In front there is a courtyard with side-chapels flanked by two cells. The pillars of the right chapel, which is intact, are most gracefully decorated. Especially attractive is the

design of the vase overflowed with fruits and foliage. On the left wall at right angles to the façade is the beautiful figure of a *nāga* couple seated on a rock with a female *chāmara*-bearer standing on the left side. Despite the pitted surface of the rock the figures exhibit a remarkable serenity of expression and elegance.

The walls of the hall are painted with figures of Buddha in different panels;

.....  
Below: *Nāga* couple, Cave 19







the one on the left wall, opposite the sixth pillar, represents Buddha giving his begging-bowl to Rāhula, the latter put forward by his mother Yaśodharā. The ceiling of the side-aisles is decorated with a running floral motif in which animals, birds and human

*Above:* Buddha to the right of the entrance door, Cave 19

figures are cleverly interwoven. The ceiling of the front aisle is painted in small panels, of which the one containing an elephant-fight is particularly noteworthy.

## Cave 20

This small monastery presents a new feature in its antechamber advancing into the hall. The pillars and pilasters of the verandah, while resembling those of Cave 1, have bracket-figures of graceful *śāla-bhañjikās* on each side of the capitals. The ceiling of the verandah has imitation beams and rafters. The design of the lintel of the door with two arches, in the form of elephants trunks issuing from the mouths of *makaras*, is again an innovation. The capitals of the pillars of the antechamber resemble those of the pillars of the verandah of Cave 2 and support an entablature carved in panels with seven Buddhas accompanied by attendants. The narrow walls beyond the pilasters are carved in three vertical compartments with *nāgas*, amorous couples with attendants and females standing on *makaras* under a tree. The male companion of the right one, it is interesting to note, stands on a tortoise.

The hall has no pillars, and some of the cells are somewhat unfinished. The doors of two of the cells have above their lintels a design which resembles the

*śikhara* of a temple. The back wall of the narrow shrine is carved with an image of Buddha in teaching attitude accompanied by the usual *chāmara*-bearers and flying figures. Most of the paintings have now disappeared. The pilaster at the left end of the verandah contains a fragmentary inscription recording the gift of the *maṇḍapa* by one Upendra. Based on palaeographical grounds this record has been assigned to a period between AD 450 to 525.

## Cave 21

The pillars of the verandah of this monastery have perished. The pilasters have a half and a full lotus-medallions with *makaras* at the centre. At each end of the verandah is a cell with a porch supported on ornate pillars. The entablature above the pillars of the left porch is carved in three panels; the central one contains a *nāga* king with his queens and attendants and the side ones have figures of *yakshas*. The subject-matter of the central compartment on the façade of the right porch is probably Hāritī with attendants (*see* p. 38).

There are four such cells with similar pillared porches on three sides of the hall – one at each side of the ante-chamber and one in the middle of each side-wall. Besides, there are eight more cells.

The pillars of the hall, twelve in number, though resembling those of Cave 1, are heavy and have disproportionately high square bases. The back wall of the shrine is carved in high relief with a seated figure of Buddha in teaching attitude.

Most of the paintings have now perished. The fragment of a panel representing Buddha preaching before the congregation can be seen on the left wall between the porch and the pilaster. The freshness of the blue colour is notable in a few fragments of the ceiling-paintings.

## Cave 22

This small monastery with a narrow verandah and four unfinished cells is excavated at a higher level and is approached by a flight of steps. The hall is astylar, and the usual antechamber is absent. The figure of Buddha, seated in the *pralamba-pāda* attitude

with the feet resting on a lotus in the back wall of the shrine, is of poor workmanship. On the right wall of the shrine, above the carved seated figures of Buddha, are painted the seven Mānushi-Buddhas with Maitreya under their respective *Bodhi* trees. The names of each of the Buddhas and trees are written respectively below and above each representation. There is also a dedicatory painted record underneath the group. On the right wall, near its junction with the back wall, can be seen another painted record below the painted figures of the *nāgas* holding the stalk of the lotus on which is seated a carved figure of Buddha.

## Cave 23

Almost similar on plan and in dimensions to Cave 21, the shrine, antechamber and side-cells with pillared porches of this monastery were left incomplete.

The pillars of the verandah are all intact and, along with the pillars of the hall and porches, display fine workmanship in ornamental details.

A similar skill is shown in the decoration of the finished pilasters, of which



Above: Decoration on a pilaster, Cave 23

.....  
 the front one on the right wall of the hall, with a figure breaking open the jaws of a *makara* within the medallion, is particularly striking. The *nāga* doorkeepers of the door-jambs, each with a foot resting on an elevated platform, are noteworthy. Traces of plaster can be seen on the ceiling of the verandah.

### Cave 24

This monastery, if completed, would have been one of the grandest monasteries and the next largest after Cave 4. The pillars of the verandah had

mostly perished, but have now been reconstructed. The decoration on the surviving fragments and on the right pilaster displays an exuberance of details executed with a consummate skill and refined taste. In the bracket-capital for instance, though the design is quite common, yet nowhere else is the treatment so lavish and finished. Here, again, do we see the culmination of the characteristic pilaster-motif admirably loaded with details. The lintel of the door has a beautiful frieze of flying figures, the two central ones holding a crown. The incomplete hall was designed to have twenty pillars, of which only one is somewhat finished and resembles

those of Cave 1. On the left wall outside the verandah was hewn out a chapel with a pillared porch. The back wall of the chapel has the figure of Buddha seated in the *pralamba-pāda* attitude with attendants and flying figures. Remains of an ancient staircase can be seen beyond the modern parapet. This monastery is most probably one of the latest to be excavated at Ajanta.

### Cave 25

This small unfinished monastery, excavated at a higher level, has an enclosed courtyard, a pillared verandah and an

.....  
*Below.* Bracket capital, Cave 24

astylar hall. Except for the two cells on the left end of the verandah, there are no cells around the hall. Nor is there any shrine. The pillars of the verandah have moulded bases, octagonal shafts and bracket-capitals.

### Cave 26

This *chaitya-griha* is larger than Cave 19 but follows it in general arrangement and decoration. However, the ornamentation, executed in meticulous details, gives the feeling of an excess and a lack of the graceful proportions and rhythmic correlation of that cave. It has a pillared verandah extending across the entire front and three entrances. The pillars, the triforium,





Above: General view, Cave 26

the façade and even the interior wall are carved with decorations in which the figure of Buddha predominates.<sup>1</sup> The *stūpa* proper has been relegated to the background and has become almost an ornamental member, the emphasis being more on the elongated and decorated plinth, the front of which is

carved with a figure of Buddha seated in the *pralamba-pāda* attitude under a pavilion. The crowning members above the *harmikā* have crumbled down. The usual *cliché* of figures of Buddha on the walls of the aisles is, however, relieved by two scenes, one representing the *mahāparinirvāṇa* of Buddha and the other, the Assault and Temptation of Māra. The former, carved

<sup>1</sup> There are reliefs of Avalokiteśvara with devotees, in danger, praying for succour, on the triforium and the space below the opening of the *chaitya*-window.

on the left wall near the side-door, contains a colossal figure of Buddha reclining on his right side on a couch between two *śāla* trees; below are the figures of his disciples and followers mourning his decease, and above are celestial beings. The second scene also occurs on the same wall. Here Buddha is seated, with his right palm in the *bhūmisparśas mudrā* under the *Bodhi* tree at the centre; on the left is Māra on an elephant accompanied by his host of demon-forces attacking Buddha; on the right is the retreat of Māra; in the foreground are the daughters of Māra trying to tempt Buddha by dance and music; and in the bottom right corner is the figure of the dejected Māra. The right wall near the side-door has an unfinished figure, of which only the outline is drawn. Much of the painting, which had little scope for originality due to the lack of plain uncarved surface, has perished. The uncarved sides of the brackets have paintings of four-armed dwarfs with the upper two hands in the attitude of supporting the superstructure.

The beauty of the façade is marred by the

collapse of the pillared verandah. At each end of the verandah is a pillared chamber, the right one leading to two cells, and the left one to one cell. An inscription engraved on the back wall of the verandah over the right side-door records the gift of the temple of Sugata (Buddha) by the monk Buddhahadra, a friend of Bhavvirāja, who was a minister of the king of

.....  
*Below: Temptation of Māra,*  
 Cave 26





Above: Interior, Cave 26

Aśmaka. The palaeography suggests a date between AD 450 and 525 for the inscription.

In front of the verandah is a courtyard having a complex of a subsidiary chapel with cells on either side. The one on the right, having a cell, a pillared verandah and a landing approached by a few steps, is mostly destroyed. The left wall of this landing contains two carved panels representing the litany to

Avalokiteśvara (see p. 42).

The continuation of the same wall on the verandah has a standing figure of Buddha in the *abhaya-mudrā*. The chapel has on its left wall an image of Buddha in teaching attitude. To the left of the image is a stone bed with a raised pillow on one side. There is a cistern attached to this *chaitya-griha* beyond the courtyard. The latter had originally a front screen with an opening for the door approached by a flight of steps.





a couple and a female standing gracefully on a *makara* with a bird perched on her right hand and her left hand resting on the head of a dwarf.

The shrine has an image of Buddha in teaching attitude on its back wall. Of the cells around the hall, only four on the right half, one of them having a porch, have survived. The major part of the left half of the hall along with the roofs of the shrine and the antechamber has collapsed. The cave cannot properly be called an independent monastery, as it forms an adjunct to Cave 26. The unfinished upper storey has suffered greatly by landslide.

## Cave 27

The landing<sup>1</sup> and the verandah on the left side of the court of Cave 26 leads to a small hall, which has a shrine and an antechamber facing the entrance-door. The antechamber advances into the hall. Its narrow front wall to the right of the pilaster is divided vertically into three compartments containing a *nāga-rāja*,

## Caves 28 and 29<sup>2</sup>

Of the two remaining caves, the one beyond Cave 27 is an unfinished monastery, of which only the pillared verandah was excavated. The other, a *chaitya-griha* in its first stage of excavation has been scooped out at the highest level, above the area between Caves 20 and 21. Both the caves are now almost inaccessible.

<sup>1</sup> The right wall of this landing contains a Rāshṭrakūṭa record.

<sup>2</sup> Respectively numbered 29 and 28 by Burgess.

# Recent Excavations



On the right bank of river Waghora, overlooking the horseshoe curve of the rock-cut caves, some potsherds and antiquities were encountered while the area was being subjected to plantation. Consequently, excavation was carried out by taking a couple of trial trenches during the field seasons in 1999-2000 and 2000-2001, by the Aurangabad Circle of the Archaeological Survey of India. The excavations reported structural remains of a burnt-brick monastery with cells opening in the central courtyard.

*Above:* Structural remains of a burnt-brick monastery

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Important antiquities encountered during the excavations and from the explored area include a terracotta plaque of Mahishāsūramardīnī. Also found is a circular silver Kshatrapa coin of Viśvasena (AD 294-304); its obverse bears the bust of the king, while the reverse has an incomplete Brāhmī legend which reads as '*Viśvasena Rañyo Mahākshatrapasy*'. A Roman gold coin (2 cm diameter) attributed to the Byzantine king Theodosius II



*Above:* Kshatrapa coin of Viśvasena; obverse and reverse

(circa AD 402-450) was also found. Besides, a few semi-precious stone beads have been unearthed.

Fresh numismatic data has corroborated to the archaeological chronology of Ajanta.



*Right:* Terracotta plaque of Mahishāsūramardīnī

*Below:* Roman gold coin of Byzantine king Theodosius II (circa AD 402-450); obverse and reverse



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